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THE MURDER ON THE BUS

By the Same Author

THE BODY IN THE SAFE
THE THREE DAGGERS

The MURDER ON THE BUS

By

CECIL FREEMAN GREGG

LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
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TO

Ivy and Jack

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CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A LETTER IS DELIVERED TO SCOTLAND YARD

A TALL, broad-shouldered, athletic-looking man walked briskly through the entrance gates of Scotland Yard, acknowledging with a smile and a quick touching of his hat the elaborate salute of the constable on duty.

"Morning!"

"Good morning, sir."

Inspector Cuthbert Higgins passed quickly through the courtyard. He was immaculately dressed as usual—his clothes seemingly a part of his personality. Everything toned. He looked more like a successful City man than what he actually was—a detective-inspector of the Metropolitan Police; yet, had Fate or his inclination been different, it is extremely probable that he would have been a success in any profession which he might have undertaken. Painstaking rather than brilliant; distrustful of intuition, yet not afraid to take a chance; preferred to wait rather than jump to a faulty conclusion; would make any sacrifice on the altar of Duty—which word he always spelled with a capital D.

His hurry was not occasioned by reason of lateness—he had risen above such petty restrictions—being merely characteristic of the man. He reached his private office,

hung his hat upon a peg, thrust his walking-stick into a stand in the corner of the room, and leisurely removed his overcoat, flicking over the letters upon his desk interestedly whilst so doing. He hung his coat on the hook underneath his hat, then seated himself at his desk. He pulled out his pipe, which he slowly filled, took out his automatic lighter, rubbed the flint, was surprised and inwardly delighted when a tiny flame rewarded his efforts, shielded the flame as if he were trying to light the pipe in a gale of wind, puffed at the mouthpiece of his pipe at a rapid rate which slowly decreased as the tobacco burned more evenly, then shook out the flame and pulled his chair more closely to the desk.

His day had begun.

Carefully and methodically, with a dagger paper-knife (which had a history of its own) he slit the envelope of each letter until all had been opened. Then he began a perusal of the respective contents, separating the matter into subjects. Suddenly he stopped and re-read a letter extracted from a buff-coloured envelope on the top of which was printed "On His Majesty's Service," but which bore no date-stamp. He rang a bell, the button to operate which being conveniently to hand. A uniformed messenger appeared in response to his summons.

"This letter from the Dead-Letter Office. Delivered by hand. When did it arrive?"

"Ten minutes before you came, sir."

"Thanks. In future please put the time of receipt upon such letters. Send—er—what's that new man's name?"

"Summers, sir?"

"That's the fellow. Send Summers to me." He nodded dismissal to the messenger, then resumed his perusal of the letter in question. There was a timid knock at his door, and following his curt "Come in!" a man entered and stood respectfully at attention before the inspector's desk.

A tall man of about twenty-four years of age, erect

and self-assured, intelligent-looking, yet possibly inexperienced.

"You asked for me, sir?"—respectfully.

Inspector Higgins handed the letter with its envelope to the waiting man.

"Read that. Then tell me what you make of it."

The man took the envelope and withdrew therefrom a letter with another envelope. He read the letter.

To the Metropolitan Police,
Scotland Yard, S.W.1.

Dear Sirs,

The enclosed letter, addressed to your good selves as above, was found inside another envelope which was opened by the Dead-Letter Office by reason of the insufficiency of its address. It was sealed as it is now, and, in case the matter is urgent, I am sending it to you by special messenger.

Yours faithfully,
For the Comptroller,
Dead-Letter Office,
D. R.

Constable Summers then turned his attention to the other envelope, which Inspector Higgins had already opened and the contents of which he had already digested.

To the Metropolitan Police.

I am going to do myself in. You fellers know me—Henry Hamper. I'm sick of it all. I'm sorry for what I've done but not for what I'm going to do. The address is Bulstroade's Buildings. Don't come with a naked light unless you want to meet me in hell now, instead of in a few years' time. Our meeting is, however, but deffered.

H. H.

"Well, Summers. What d'you make of it?" queried Inspector Higgins, who had been studying the other keenly whilst he was reading the letter. Had Summers but known it, he was being tested by the astute inspector, who always thus secretly examined newcomers to the Yard.

"First of all, sir, there's the original envelope, the one misdirected. That does not appear to be here."

"Good. The Post Office people did not send it. Go on."

"Then, 'deferred' is spelled incorrectly."

Inspector Higgins nodded. "Anything else?"

"It appears to be a case of suicide, sir."

"H'm." The inspector did not seem so pleased with this contention on the part of his subordinate. "Is there no alternative?"

Constable Summers gazed at his Chief inquiringly for a moment, then:

"Surely, sir, you're not thinking of murder?"

Inspector Higgins laughed shortly. "Murder? Well, of course, that *is* an alternative, but—is there not a chance that the whole thing may turn out to be a hoax?"

"Hoax, sir? No one would dare——"

"Wouldn't they?" Higgins broke in upon the other's remarks. "Oh, wouldn't they! When you've been in the Service as long as I have, Summers, you'll realise that there is a considerable number of half-wits knocking about who seem to think that the highest form of jest is to send the police on a fool's errand. Lord! Don't we know it!" he added, almost inaudibly, yet plaintively. "Don't we just know it!"

"Do you want me to look into it, sir?"

"I do. Bulstroade's Buildings are in the East End somewhere. Look them up. Then ask Doctor Pape to accompany you, and if he should tender you any advice don't be above taking it. That's all."

Constable Summers placed the letters and envelopes in his pocket, bowed to his Chief and made for the door, where he halted at a word from the inspector.

"Just a little warning. Don't take my suggestion—that the matter may be a hoax—too seriously. I shall be surprised if it isn't, but don't go bursting into the room with a lighted cigarette. The man may have committed suicide by gas-poisoning, as he suggests, and—er—we don't want to lose—er—Doctor Pape—er—do we?"

"No, sir." Constable Summers was a bit uncertain as to how to take the inspector's levity, but he added, with a grave face, "In any case, sir, I don't smoke."

The door closed, and Inspector Higgins with a smile resumed his study of his other correspondence. This matter of the letter was one which a subordinate, and an inexperienced subordinate at that, could well undertake. Higgins had a full sense of the value of his own time—and he was paid by the State. It was not that he had an exaggerated idea of his own importance, but merely that he was honest. He did not believe in "keeping a dog and barking yourself."

Constable Summers, as soon as he had left the inspector's office, had a feeling that somehow he had been placed on trial: that his conduct of this particular case would be carefully filed away in the inspector's brain for future reference. He threw back his shoulders and determined to make the most of his chance. A suicide was not much of a job, but at least it was a start.

Bulstroade's Buildings. That must be the first step. Where were they? A visit to the reference library was indicated. From the attendant he obtained a directory of immense size and of considerable weight. Quickly he turned the leaves. B . . . B . . . Bu . . . Buchanan Gardens, Bucharest Road, Buckingham Gate . . . Road . . . Street . . . Buckland Crescent, Buckley Road, Bucklersbury, Budge Row, Bullen Street . . . Getting warmer! . . . Bulstrode Street . . . Ah! Street! . . . Spelled differently, too! . . . Bunhill Row . . . B . . . Why! Damn it all! There was no such place! He turned

back a few leaves and started again. He was quite right. Bulstroade's Buildings did not exist. He had a moment of panic when a precipitate return to Inspector Higgins seemed the only thing to do, but he pulled himself together. This would never do! On his first job, too! He consulted the attendant.

"Not there? Nothing in that. Name changed, probably —may have been a crime or something there. Remember Crippen! Try an older directory. Here, I'll get you one. New here, eh?"

Without waiting for a reply the attendant bustled away, to return in a very short time with a similar volume of the same bulk, but with its cover a more faded crimson.

"Here y'are, chum. Try this one. It's nine years old."

Constable Summers seized the volume eagerly, and a second later was feverishly turning the leaves. He gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction—relief because the Bulstroade's Buildings appeared therein, and satisfaction because his momentary panic of a few moments before had been a near thing!

Bulstroade's Buildings, E.1. Map O.8. P.9. Summers turned to the elaborate map pasted in the cover of the directory, and opened it on the library table. The letters and the numbers related to certain squares on the map; the letters ran horizontally and the numbers vertically. He ran his finger along the top until he reached the letter O, then he followed the lines downwards until he reached the number 8 on the left. The square P.9 was thus the next square below to the right. He marvelled somewhat that such buildings should occupy two squares, then the solution came to his mind. He was quite right. Bulstroade's Buildings were on the exact spot where the lines divided O. and P., and 8 and 9. Good!

He was just making a copy of the precise location of the Buildings when a voice from the door shouted, without preamble:

"Summers?"

He looked up. "Yes?"

"Dr. Pape's downstairs. Old Higgins told him that there was a case for him and that you were going to investigate. Dr. Pape wants to know what about it."

"All right. I'm coming."

He followed the other out of the library and thought to improve the occasion by asking what sort of a man the police surgeon was.

"Pape?" queried the other disrespectfully. "He's all right. Bit of an old woman, of course, but . . ." He shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"Thanks." Constable Summers hurried away, to find an irascible, middle-aged gentleman pacing impatiently up and down outside the entrance gates. A colleague pointed him out as Dr. Pape.

"I'm Summers, sir. You're the police surgeon?"

"I am. And you know it. Constable Harriss just pointed me out. I saw him. Let's get along."

"Certainly, sir." Constable Summers immediately set off at a brisk pace for the station, but was stopped by Dr. Pape.

"Not so fast, Summers—not so fast. My car's here."

"I'd better meet you at the Buildings, sir, hadn't I?"

"Don't be a fool. Jump in."

"Thank you very much, sir."

The journey to the East End was undertaken in silence. Dr. Pape appeared to be asleep or in some other state of coma, whilst the constable did not know how to cope with the police surgeon's mood, or, in fact, what to make of him at all. Had he but known that he was to journey to Bulstroade's Buildings by car he would not have troubled to have looked them up in the directory and so incurred the doctor's wrath by his delay. It would have been the chauffeur's funeral then! He did not know of the encyclopædic knowledge of London's highways and by-ways which Dr. Pape's chauffeur possessed.

The car drew to a standstill, and the driver jumped down and opened the door.

"Bulstroade's Buildings, first turning on the right, sir. Half-way down."

"Thanks." Dr. Pape nodded to his man, then: "Come along, Summers."

They proceeded at a brisk rate down the road indicated, but had not gone very far before Summers crossed the road to consult a uniformed colleague.

"Bulstroade's Buildings, eh? Try Birkenhead Mansions. They used to be called somebody or other's Buildings."

"Thanks."

Birkenhead Mansions, whilst imposing in their bulk, were unprepossessing in their appearance. Dull, flat, uninteresting walls, badly in need of painting; rectangular windows with many a broken pane; the lower windows having boxes on the sills where bedraggled plants struggled vainly for existence. The Mansions had seen better days.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH CONSTABLE SUMMERS COMMENCES OPERATIONS

ALTHOUGH termed mansions, there was apparently only one entrance. This was a large brick archway with stone steps leading upwards, and with innumerable children of all ages, dirty, unkempt, yet amazingly cheerful, playing beneath its protection. Dr. Pape and Constable Summers passed through the entrance wonderingly. A bedraggled woman was leaning against the broken door of a room. To her Summers addressed himself:

"Henry Hamper live here?"

"Dunno and don' care." The woman had shifty eyes, but they did not fail to notice the hard look which had crept into the doctor's face. She hedged:

"Try next floor. All families 'ere. An' none o' that nime."

They tried the next floor, and were surprised to find that their progress was barred by a door, upon which was painted by an amateur sign-writer:

Mrs. Hick. Lodgins.

Summers knocked and pulled an old-fashioned bell at the side of the door. For a few moments there was no response, but upon his pulling the bell again they could both hear the sound of shuffling feet. The door opened.

"Well?"—uncompromisingly.

"Henry Hamper live here?"

"What d'yer want 'im for?"

"So he does live here, eh?"—quietly, from the doctor.

"I never said so."

"Don't quibble. Show us to his room."

The woman hesitated—and was lost. Unceremoniously she was thrust aside by Constable Summers, whom Dr. Pape followed.

"His room?"

"Second door on the left up the next flight—but 'e won't answer—I've tried."

The two police officials looked at each other quickly, then looked away. They hurried up the next flight of steps—stone, as before. The second door on the left was locked on the inside, and the end of the large, old-fashioned key protruded slightly on the outside. Mrs. Hick had followed them upstairs, consumed with curiosity. Summers turned to her.

"You have a duplicate key of this room, eh? Then fetch it." The woman shuffled away. Constable Summers bent and tried to peer through the keyhole. Was it imagination or could he detect a faint smell of gas? With the tips of his forefinger and thumb he twiddled the end of the key until the blade was perpendicular; then he produced from the cover of his pocket diary a pencil, thin but strong. A little pressure, a slight adjustment of the key, and he felt it move. A moment later it dropped into the room with a musical rattle. An asthmatic sound behind him made Constable Summers turn. Mrs. Hick had returned, and had brought a key with her. She was much out of breath.

"These stairs," she panted, "'ll be the death o' me."

Summers took the key and inserted it into the keyhole, then he turned to the waiting landlady.

"That'll be all, thank you."

"Ho. Will it! It's my 'ouse, I'll 'ave you know. An' 'oo are you ter order me abaht in me own 'ouse, I'd like ter know." She folded her arms on her ample bosom and glared defiance.

Constable Summers produced a card—an official card—

one of a hundred he had had printed a few weeks before, and none of which he had yet had the opportunity of using.

EDWIN SUMMERS
Metropolitan Police.

Criminal Investigation Department,
Scotland Yard. S.W.1.

Terse and to the point. It did not give away too much information. He might, from such a card, be either the Commissioner or a Commissionaire.

He was both surprised and gratified at the result. The woman visibly wilted, then retreated backwards slowly, as if contact with the police officials might contaminate her.

"Sorry, gents, I'm sure. I'd better be goin'." She went.

"Now then, Summers, you'd better be careful." Dr. Pape was still smiling at the woman's discomfiture. "I think perhaps that I'd better go in first and open the windows and so on, you see——"

"No, no, sir. It's all right. After all, sir, it's my job, and——"

The police surgeon shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please, but take a tip from me: put a handkerchief over your nose and mouth; walk in quickly, turn off the gas-tap and open the window; then come straight out, and close the door after you."

"Thank you, sir." Now that he was not to be robbed of the privilege of being the first to enter the room, Constable Summers was all affability, and—what was it Inspector Higgins had said? If Dr. Pape should tender any advice, don't be above taking it. Well, he wouldn't be above taking it, and in any case such advice was in the doctor's own sphere.

He pulled out his handkerchief and covered his nose and mouth, and the police surgeon did likewise. Summers seized the handle of the door, opened it gingerly, then flung open the door and rushed into the room.

He gave one glance at a still figure upon the floor, immediately noted a tube leading from it to a gas-bracket on the wall, stepped quickly over the recumbent figure to reach the bracket, and promptly turned off the tap. Then, as advised, he gave his attention to the window. The spaces between the frames and the woodwork were stuffed with newspaper, which he tore away with his free hand. A moment later he had released the window-catch and flung up the lower frame. Then, precipitately, he retired from the room, slammed the door after him and gulped into his lungs such air as was allowed to percolate from the passage below.

"Phew!" He now utilised his handkerchief to mop his brow, which was gleaming with sweat. "How long, Doctor?"

"Better wait five minutes. It was no hoax, eh?"

"No, sir. It was not." Constable Summers' words were emphatic, for in spite of the inspector's words he had never really believed that anyone would dare to hoax the Yard. He now considered his beliefs completely vindicated.

The five-minute wait seemed long—and Summers was impatient.

"Suppose the poor devil's still alive, sir? We ought to do something."

"If he killed himself when he posted that letter, then he's been dead many hours. In any case, I presume you've turned off the gas, so he's stopped inhaling any more poison, and we can do nothing till we can breathe with comfort. Come along. Time's up." Dr. Pape stood aside for the other to precede him. He was a man of discernment, and realised how keen the other was to set about this, his first case.

As soon as he was inside the room, Constable Summers drew a tentative breath. The opening of the window had apparently had the desired effect, for the air was, if anything, sweeter than that of the passage outside. Then, together with Dr. Pape, he walked to the body lying upon the floor. It was of a man, small—almost puny—with the head enveloped in a pillow-case which had apparently been taken from the bed against the opposite wall. A piece of rubber tubing connected the gas-bracket with the pillow-case, which the doctor carefully removed. The man's head was lying upon the pillow inside the case, which had been unbuttoned first and rebuttoned round his chin.

"Dead as a door-knocker," murmured the police surgeon, and for some reason Summers was inexpressibly shocked. "Been dead a couple o' days, I should think. Be able perhaps to tell better later on. H'm."

Summers gazed round the room, leaving Dr. Pape to his ruminations.

The furniture consisted of a table (upon which rested a hat and a pair of gloves), two chairs and the bed. Also upon the table was a piece of candle set in its own grease, and on the floor was a newspaper.

The man had taken care to seal all the cracks between the window-panes with paper, most of which the constable had removed when he entered the room for the first time, but he had made no attempt to cover a ventilator near the ceiling. There was a small cupboard in one corner, to which Summers now turned his attention. He opened the door.

"Mother Hubbard?" queried the doctor, looking up from his gruesome task and noting the bare shelves.

"Yessir."

"H'm. Better send for the ambulance. Then lock the room and take the key away."

"That's exactly what I was thinking of doing, sir," replied the constable mendaciously. "That is, of course,

if you wouldn't mind waiting here whilst I telephone. I don't suppose there's an instrument in this benighted hole."

"Right. I'll wait. Tell the ambulance men that I'm here, will you? They'll understand."

"Certainly, sir."

Constable Summers then made his exit, carefully closing the door behind him, to find the passage outside the door completely blocked by children and adults from the floors below, who eyed him with expectancy. Mrs. Hick was not in evidence, but he shrewdly guessed that she was not far away. He cleared a passage with difficulty, but was chagrined to find that he was followed downstairs by the inquisitive children. He shook them off, however, when he entered a near-by post office, where he telephoned for an ambulance and gave Dr. Pape's message.

His return journey was still in the nature of a procession, as he was quickly recognised by the children waiting outside the post office. He pushed his way through the crowded stairways and started to open the door. Then he thought that it was about time he exercised his authority with the recalcitrant neighbours. He turned quickly:

"Well! What the deuce do you think you all want? Clear off! Clear off, or I'll run some of you in." There was not the slightest move, and for the moment he was nonplussed. Then he pulled out his diary, removed that selfsame pencil which had ejected the key of the lock a short while before, and walked up to one of the waiting women who, arms akimbo, was taking up more than her fair share of space.

"Your name and address, please. Obstruction of police. Serious crime."

He waited expectantly, and the woman shuffled uneasily, then made for the stairs. "Or-right! Or-right!

I'm agoin'!" Constable Summers watched her retreat, then cast his eye round for another victim. One and all they evaded his gaze. Five minutes later the passage was entirely cleared, and Summers re-entered the tragic room with a sigh of satisfaction.

Dr. Pape looked up quickly, then resumed his abstracted gaze at the wallpaper, placidly smoking a cigarette.

"All clear?"

"Yes, sir," replied the constable. "They'll be along shortly."

"Good." Dr. Pape gazed thoughtfully round the room. "Doesn't seem to be much about here. There's one thing you must do before you let the ambulance men take him away—if you'll—er—excuse my making a suggestion."

"It's kind of you to help, sir. What must I do?" Constable Summers thought furiously, for, as far as he was aware, there was nothing further to be done.

"Well—for one thing—you must have that landlady here to identify him."

"Do you think, then, that he might not be the Henry Hamper person?"

"I don't think anything of the sort, but it's our job to be certain. This is his room, right enough—if we are to believe the admirable Mrs. Hick—but we don't know that *this* is actually Henry Hamper. And another tip" —Dr. Pape looked at the constable quizzically, and the other nodded eagerly.

"Yessir?"

The doctor continued with a smile: "Take his fingerprints. According to the letter which Hig—er—Inspector Higgins read to me over the telephone, this Hamper is known at the Yard, and this will help identification. The inspector may ask for them, and you want to be prepared."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do it at once."

It was, however, more easily said than done, and it was not until the doctor had suggested a little soot from the chimney as a means of obtaining the prints that the difficulty was overcome. The constable was surprised to find the chimney stopped up with paper. Apparently Henry Hamper when he decided to take his life also resolved to make a good job of it!

A little soot; two or three pages from his diary; and the matter, albeit very repugnant to the constable's sensibilities, was accomplished.

The sharp, incisive clang of a bell in the street below presaged the arrival of the police ambulance, and a few moments later the men could be heard tramping up the stone steps.

Constable Summers went to the door and opened it. The crowd, if anything, was bigger than before, and he glared round to frighten some of its members into retreat. It had not the slightest effect. He gave it up as a bad job, and beckoned the attendants into the room.

"Hallo, Doc! Here we are again!" The man in charge greeted the police surgeon cheerily, then gazed down thoughtfully at the deceased Hamper. "H'm. Another of 'em! Simple way out, I suppose. No mess. No fuss. No nothing! Ah well! Finished with him, Doc?" Dr. Pape nodded affirmatively. "And you?" He turned to Constable Summers, who gave a start at being so addressed, forgetting for the moment that he was ostensibly in charge of the case.

"Er—yes, yes."

"Righto! Come along, boys. Gently now. Lord! He don't weigh above an ounce. Mind the door."

Summers rushed and held the door open, then noticed the inquisitive crowd: "Make way there! Make way!"

No one took the slightest notice. Then the cheery attendant took up the cudgels. He apparently had some experience in these matters. He glared aggressively at the crowd. Then in a stentorian voice bellowed:

"Clear out the blarsted way, some of yer, can't yer! What the hell d'yer think——"

The crowd slowly began to melt. The cheery one turned and winked to his helpers.

Ten minutes later the ambulance was on its way to the mortuary.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH A CORONER SAYS A FEW WORDS

"WELL?" Dr. Pape looked at the constable quizzically and interrogatively, and such was the concentration of his gaze that the eyes of the other wavered uncomfortably.

"What, sir?"

"So, after all, you are satisfied as to the deceased's identity."

"Gosh, sir, I forgot all about what you said! Lord! I'm a fool. It was that ambulance man. He got me rattled when he asked me whether I had finished." And from his agitation Constable Summers was obviously still rattled!

"Ah well. It's your funeral. I'm off back to the Yard. Is there anything I can do for you on the way or when I get there?"

Summers made a gallant attempt to pull himself together. He knew that he was not cutting a very heroic figure on this his first case. He had a few moments of intense thought, then:

"Yes, sir, there is. If you would be so kind, will you please take these prints to the Records Department and ask them whether the deceased has ever passed through our hands." A wealth of pride in the possessive "our."

"Certainly, Summers—certainly. Anything else?"

"No, sir. Unless, of course, you have anything to suggest yourself, sir."

"No. The fingerprints were all I had in mind. Well, I'll be pushing along." With a nod of his head the police surgeon left the room, and Summers remained perfectly

still until he could no longer hear the retreating footsteps. Gosh! He was now on his own. What was the first step? Ah! An interview with Mrs. Hick, the landlady. He left the room, having closed the window, then locked the door behind him and pocketed the key.

Sundry heads from adjacent doors peered out enquiringly, and his journey down the flight of steps was followed inquisitively by many pairs of eyes.

"Mrs. Hick! Mrs. Hick!" he shouted on reaching the dividing door. There was no response. He shouted again with the same result, then turned to one of the tenants.

"Where's the landlady?"

"Gorn!"

"What d'you mean, 'Gorn'?" Summers was startled.

"Gorn aht!"

"I know what you mean! But where?"

"'Ow sh'd I know?"

"Well. Make a guess."

The other grinned. "Better try the public bar o' the 'Three Daggers.'"

Constable Summers breathed a sigh of relief. For one brief moment he had thought that the woman had bolted, hiding some guilty secret.

"And where's that?"

"Rahnd the corner," replied the other in some surprise. Fancy anyone not knowing where the nearest pub was!

"Thanks."

Constable Summers hurried to the hostelry in question, entered the public bar, and there he found Mrs. Hick, surrounded by cronies, and slightly under the weather. All were animatedly discussing the suicide of her lodger, and stout and gin were flowing freely. The constable walked up to the landlady and touched her on the shoulder. She looked round, grinned impishly when she discovered who it was accosting her (strong drink had ap-

parently given her courage), and then flung out her arms, exclaiming dramatically:

"Pinched!"

A roar of laughter from her satellites greeted this sally, and Summers began to feel uncomfortable.

"No, Mrs. Hick. You're not under arrest——" He paused for effect, then: "—yet," he added.

The woman sobered instantly.

"What d'yer mean?" she demanded truculently, yet with a tinge of apprehension.

"Nothing. But I want you to return to your house with me so that we can have a little chat."

"Or-right," she acquiesced with ill grace, waved a grimy hand to the bar in general, then followed submissively at the constable's heels.

Once clear of the atmosphere of the bar, the comparatively fresh air of the street, whilst it cleared some of the fog from Mrs. Hick's brain, seemingly pinned shackles to her feet, and she clung to the arm of Constable Summers for support, much to the amusement of all the onlookers. It must have been years since Mrs. Hick had had such a presentable escort, and she made the most of it.

Arrived back at the house, they ran the gauntlet of the tenants of the first floor until they reached the dividing door. There Mrs. Hick produced a large doorkey from beneath her apron and opened the door, where the pair immediately became the cynosure of the eyes of Mrs. Hick's lodgers.

"Upstairs," commanded Summers. "To *his* room."

"Lawks! Won't me own do?"

"All right. As you please."

They walked to the end of the passage, and the landlady threw open the furthermost door and preceded the constable into the room.

She collapsed thankfully into a well-worn wicker chair, whilst Summers produced his official notebook.

"Your name, please."

"Martha Hick."

"You live here?"

" 'Course I do." The constable looked up sharply. "Yes, sir," she promptly amended her reply, denuding it of any semblance of truculence.

"What was the name of your lodger upstairs?"

" 'Enry 'Amper."

" 'Ow long—ahem." (This dropping of aspirates was becoming infectious!) "How long has he been a tenant of yours?"

"Three weeks." (She giggled, having recently read a book with a similar title.) " 'E paid three months' rent, so I didn't need no reference."

Summers smiled sardonically. "What do you know of him?"

" 'E weren't a mucher. Came 'ome tight before 'e'd bin 'ere a week. I'd 'a give 'im notice only 'e promised not ter do it agen." (A look of virtue comic in its gravity!) "Then 'e come 'ome tight agen on Sunday night. Brought 'ere in a keb by a pal and a slop—I mean a policeman. I banged on 'is door on Monday mornin' and told 'im 'e could sling 'is 'ook. Lawks! I s'pose it was me bein' so 'ard-'arted in turnin' 'im aht 'o 'ouse an' 'ome that made 'im do 'isself in. Oh, deary, deary!" The woman began to shed maudlin tears, and Constable Summers, who had been assiduously making notes of her comments, decided to end his catechism.

"Oh, I dunno, missis. Anyhow, I want you to come with me to the mortuary. Just to see if you can identify him as your lodger."

"Lawks, sir! I don't 'ave ter go, do I?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm sorry. I'll make it worth your while."

The landlady brightened visibly, and Summers decided that the half-crown he would give her would not be a legitimate item to go upon his expense sheet, but

that he would treat it as a fine upon himself for neglecting Dr. Pape's advice prior to the removal of the deceased from the premises. "Come along, then. We'd best be going. And, meanwhile, let me warn you not to try and re-let that room until we've done with it. In any case, as Mr. Hamper paid three mouths' rent in advance you cannot honestly do so yet awhile. Come along."

The journey by bus to the mortuary was completed in silence, and the formality was soon over. Without a doubt, the deceased was Henry Hamper, or, to be meticulously exact, the man who had taken the room in Bulstroade's Buildings under that name. Summers gave the woman the promised reward together with her return fare, and warned her that she would be wanted for the inquest, due notice of which would be given. Then he returned to Scotland Yard.

. . . . . .

Sergeant Mercier, in charge of the Records Department of Scotland Yard, was, without doubt, a quick worker. It was his proud boast that he could find any required information in fifteen seconds, and, although this was an exaggerated statement, he had a commendable reputation for the speed with which his department produced replies to any question of fact. He also had a reputation for wit, which was not quite so commendable. In fact, not to put a fine point upon it, it was deplorable. His humour was generally antiquated, always personal, and sometimes vulgar. To give him his due, he was, years before, actually funny, until he acquired this reputation for wit. Then the original fount of humour dried up and became forced. Human nature!

When Dr. Pape had returned to Scotland Yard and presented to Mercier the fingerprints of the deceased Hamper, the sergeant was put upon his mettle.

"It'll be ready in fifteen seconds, sir. I'll let you know —provided, of course, that he is represented in our

academy of those with burglarious instincts—his name, rank or rating. What he did: how he did it——"

"Fifteen seconds!" Dr. Pape cut short the harangue. "That should be time enough. Constable Summers will not be wanting the information for a couple of hours or so," he continued dryly. He nodded adieu and left the department, whilst Sergeant Mercier gazed after him, if not exactly open-mouthed, at least in utter bewilderment.

Thus, when Constable Summers returned to Scotland Yard, having settled with Mrs. Hick, Sergeant Mercier had only just recovered his equanimity.

"Hullo, Constable. I've had this information waiting for you for hours." (Constable Summers blinked, but refrained from comment.) "The prints you sent me were those of Henry Hamper. Three years for attempted blackmail just after the war. Been a good boy since. At least, he's been lucky—no subsequent convictions."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Any family?"

"One. Boy. Used to visit his old man in quod. Name of Thomas. Went to Canada, I believe. No—wait a minute—here's the kid's address: Fetter Street, Camberwell. Anything wrong with the old man?"

"Dead, that's all."

"H'm. Well, I must get along with my job. Anything further you may require from us—a word to me and it shall be done!" The sergeant was out to impress this novitiate of the Yard.

"Thank you, Sergeant. Fetter Street, eh? I must go and break the sad news, I suppose."

Fetter Street was not exactly in a salubrious neighbourhood, at least as regards its immediate vicinity, and was very similar in appearance to the street in which Birkenhead Mansions were situated. Summers had to wait until the son of Henry Hamper returned from work, which, as was carefully explained to him by a

neighbour, depended on the state of trade. Thomas Hamper was a vendor of vegetables from a barrow, in short, a costermonger, and his day finished when his wares were sold. A little judicious pumping, and the constable ascertained that the young Hamper was straight, a good kid, and likely to have a little shop of his own when he got spliced, which would be in the near future.

Trade must have been good, for Thomas Hamper returned to his home about five o'clock. He was of medium size, about nineteen years of age, with a pleasing open countenance. His dress was merely ordinary, save that he wore a muffler instead of the more customary collar and tie. His voice was somewhat hoarse, probably as a result of his calling (using both meanings of the word), and he had a little trouble with his aspirates, being apt to stress rather than omit.

Summers broke the news as gently as he could. The boy took it stoically.

"Dead, eh? Suicide?" He looked up at the constable. "You know what he was, I suppose?" Summers nodded affirmatively. "Well. That's past and done with. He wasn't a bad sort to me. Suicide!" He shook his head from side to side. "I can't hardly believe it!"

. . . . . .

In due course the inquest was held.

Mrs. Hick, resplendent in her best garb and crowned with a hat decorated with an immense feather, identified the deceased as her lodger. Thomas Hamper also identified him as his father. The evidence of Dr. Pape and Constable Summers as to the finding of the body was given early in the brief proceedings. Death was pronounced by the police surgeon to be caused by gas-poisoning. The coroner interspersed a few remarks, unintelligible to most of his audience, as to the deadly properties of coal-gas and the efforts of the great gas undertakings to find a means of circumventing the—er—apparent—er—popularity of gas as a means of—er—ending one's

miserable existence. The three years' imprisonment of the deceased was duly commented upon. A suggested motive for the deceased taking his own life was remorse for his past misdeeds, although the coroner carefully explained that such of his misdeeds as were known had been duly expiated by the afore-mentioned term of imprisonment.

Then the question of the state of his mind at the time of his death. It was a moot point whether or not all criminals were not—er—mentally unbalanced. The coroner liked the phrase and repeated it:

"Mentally unbalanced. Then we come to this last letter written by the deceased. It may tend to show the state of his mind when we remember that it was enclosed in another envelope which was insufficiently addressed. In fact, the word 'insufficiently' but baldly describes the matter, for we know that the original envelope did not bear any address at all. The Dead-Letter Office naturally assumed that the letter had been posted by an absent-minded person who had forgotten to place thereon the addressee's—er—address. But upon the envelope being opened a further envelope was found inside addressed to our good friends—the Metropolitan Police—two of whose representatives we have here to-day." The coroner bowed formally to the police surgeon and Constable Summers. "The substance of that letter you know. Mr. Thomas Hamper, who has my deepest sympathy, cannot say definitely that it is his father's handwriting, which, considering that he has no sample, and has not seen any of his father's handwriting since he was a mere boy, is not surprising. From the substance of that letter it is apparent that the deceased intended to take his own life, and warns the police about a naked light. I pass over his—er—ribald reference to meeting some of the Force in the—er—nether regions. . . ."

"Suicide whilst of unsound mind."

Thus ended Constable Summers' first case.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS ASKS A FEW QUESTIONS

INSPECTOR HIGGINS lay back in his chair, his right ankle resting upon his left knee, his thumbs thrust into the armholes of his waistcoat, whilst his fingers beat a continuous tattoo upon his chest. He sucked meditatively at his pipe and gazed at the ceiling, waiting for the other to finish. Eventually:

"Thank you, Summers. Clear and concise. So it was suicide, and not a hoax. Hand in your written report to Sergeant Mercier." He nodded dismissal to the other, who instantly retired; then the inspector reached for his hat and coat. He had decided to call it a day!

It was a cold November day, yet, in spite of this and of the fact that he lived over five miles from the Yard, he decided to walk home. He was an athletic man, and walking was his only exercise. It was eight o'clock when he arrived home, and nine before he rose from the table having finished the huge meal prepared for him by his landlady. Then he settled himself in his comfortable armchair before a blazing fire, a large whisky-and-soda conveniently to hand and opened the first page of the latest thriller. He did not read this type of fiction for its educational value, for no novelist could teach him his own job; nor, strangely enough, did he read it for amusement—although some of the fictional detectives caused him to smile either at their obtuseness or at their infallibility; as a matter of fact he read this type of book mainly because it interested him without any mental effort, and—contradictorily—because he obtained a little mental exercise in trying to find the criminal or other-

wise elucidating the mystery. He was invariably correct in his choice of criminal, but he cheated! Not that he looked at the last chapter before reading the first. Oh no! He merely picked on the most unlikely character, who preferably had an unassailable alibi and was miles away from the scene of the crime at the time of its commission. If he had not discovered the criminal before he was half-way through the book it had his commendation. But the novelist had to play fair. No suppressing of a vital clue until the last page. Many a time Higgins had flung down a book in disgust for this very reason.

The book he was reading at this time was certainly a thriller! Modesty forbids us to disclose its name. It was such a thriller that Inspector Higgins woke with a start! It was his telephone bell ringing. He stretched his cramped limbs and hurried to the instrument.

"Hallo! Hallo! Yes. Higgins speaking. Oh! Is that you, Chief? . . . Yes, yes. I see. I'll go at once. Goodbye, sir."

Higgins replaced the receiver with a sigh. There would be no bed for him to-night!

Five minutes later he closed his side-door, wheeling his bicycle to the kerb. It was just his luck that the little two-seater which he had recently purchased should already be laid up for repairs, but . . .

He arrived at the bus terminus at half-an-hour after midnight, and presented his card to the man at the gate.

"Inspector Higgins? Step straight through, please. In the corner over there."

The direction thus given was entirely superfluous, for in the corner was a small group of men, bus drivers and conductors mostly, with the tall helmet of a policeman standing out from the centre of the group. Higgins strode quickly to the corner, and the men looked round at his approach. The policeman, a constable, breathed a sigh of relief, thankful to get the job lifted from his shoulders.

"Inspector Higgins, sir? This is a rum business, sir."

The men stood back to give him passage, then reformed as he passed through. In the centre of the group stood the constable, and at his feet the body of a man, of huge proportions, but soberly dressed. The man had been shot throught the back of the neck, and the bullet had passed through his throat. It was not a pleasant sight. In spite of his familiarity with death in varied forms, Inspector Higgins could not suppress a shudder of repulsion.

"Awful sight, ain't he, sir?"

"He certainly is. Doctor been?"

"And gone, sir."

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir. Called away almost as soon as he got here. Urgent case."

"H'm. Should've thought this was urgent enough."

"That's what I thought, sir, but the doctor said that whereas this poor chap was dead, his other patient was not."

"H'm." Inspector Higgins considered this for a moment, then: "Well, what did he say?"

The constable pulled from his tunic pocket a well-thumbed notebook. "Nothing much, sir," he mumbled, quickly turning the leaves. "Dead, of course, but . . . Ah! Here we are! Spinal cord severed, death instantaneous. Been dead about an hour, and——"

"What time did he examine this man?"

"About three-quarters of an hour ago, sir."

"Then two hours ago this"—indicating the still form with the forefinger of his right hand—"was alive?"

"Er—yessir. I s'pose so."

"H'm. And we're wasting time here." Higgins looked up sharply. "Where did you find him?"

"On top of a bus, sir."

"On—top—of—a—what?"

"Bus, sir."

"Bus, eh? Then he's been moved?"

"'Course 'e 'as." A gratuitous comment from one of the onlookers. Inspector Higgins turned to the interrupter, his eyebrows raised in interrogation.

"And what, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"It's all very well for you 'tecs to talk about not movin' 'im, but we 'appen to be 'uman beings." The man spluttered, somewhat ill at ease, Higgins having taken him up so sharply, yet he continued: "'Course 'e's bin moved. We didn't know the poor devil was dead, an' we 'ad to do the best we could for 'im."

"I see." Privately, Inspector Higgins thought the man's explanation perfectly reasonable, but such is the fetish at the Yard never to move a case in the hope of preserving possible clues that his official soul was shocked. "And the bus?" He turned once more to the waiting constable.

"This one, sir."

Inspector Higgins viewed the vehicle indicated. It was an old-fashioned two-decker, and, unlike the majority of the company's buses, open at the top. The more modern type was covered-in and had six wheels with balloon tyres. This had only four wheels and the tyres were solid.

"Come along, Constable. I'd like to view the bus-top first. You can show me where he was."

This last instruction, however, was completely unnecessary, for, once on the top deck, there was no doubt as to where the unfortunate man had been sitting, for one of the seats was covered with blood.

It was the back seat of the near side. Higgins surveyed it with a thoughtful frown upon his forehead, then he turned to the constable.

"The back seat, Constable?"

The man nodded. "Yessir."

"And he was shot in the *back* of the neck," Higgins ruminated audibly.

The significance of his remark dawned upon the constable's intelligence.

"Gosh, sir! I hadn't thought of that!"

Inspector Higgins made no comment. A pause, then the constable ventured a suggestion.

"He may have been turning round when he was shot, sir, or—or something," he finished lamely.

The inspector nodded abstractedly, still frowning at the bloodstained seat. There was the sound of voices in the garage below.

"Now then, you chaps. Ain't you got no 'omes?"

Higgins gazed down from the top of the bus, to find a caretaker or night-watchman endeavouring to herd the inquisitive bus-men from the garage. He leaned over the side and called down:

"I would be obliged if the driver and conductor of this bus would stay behind. I may want to talk to them."

"That's all right, sir. We had no intention of going," a cheerful voice replied.

"Thanks." Once more Higgins resumed his study of the back seat. He leaned right over the back and inspected the destination board. It was certainly weather-beaten, but bore no marks of a recent bullet. Then he turned his attention to the seat in front. No marks. Then, with great care, he searched the floor of the bus. No signs of a bullet! This was getting beyond him. Had the man been shot before he came on the bus? This seemed the only solution. Unless, of course, the bullet, having passed through the man's neck, failed to lodge in any part of the structure. This seemed impossible, for the man was found in the back seat, and was shot from behind. The shot must therefore have come from above the route board, and the bullet should be either in the seat in front, or in the floor. Yet it was not!

"Who is the deceased?" He turned to the constable.

"Dunno, sir. Nothing in his pockets to identify him, sir. Plenty o' money, but nothing else."

"H'm. Let's have a good look at him." The pair descended the omnibus steps and walked to the dead man.

The watchman had apparently been successful in his efforts to disperse the employees for, barring two, the garage was now deserted.

The dead man was big boned and big limbed, and to the best of Higgins's judgment about forty-five years of age. Cleanshaven, with greying hair, there was little outstanding about him save his size.

Higgins felt gingerly in the man's coat for a tailor's tab, but it had been removed. The trousers buttons were perfectly plain, and bore no impress of the tailor's name, as one would have expected from the style and material of the suit. From his cursory inspection it appeared to Inspector Higgins that a deliberate attempt had been made to suppress the man's identity. He turned to the two bus-men, who were interested spectators, and addressed the conductor.

"You found him, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

Inspector Higgins pulled out a huge gunmetal contraption which served to keep him cognisant of the flight of time, and consulted its dial.

"Where was the bus between—er—ten forty-five and say eleven fifteen this—er—evening?"

The conductor consulted his timesheet and ticket-record—that mysterious sheet upon which a conductor enters periodically the distinctive numbers of his tickets—and then replied:

"I clocked on at stage number fourteen—Glasswell Street, Horton—at ten forty, so at ten forty-five I must have been——"

"That doesn't matter," interrupted Higgins. "Ten forty is near enough for my purpose. And at eleven fifteen?"

"Nearly here, sir. This is the last bus on this route, and we're due back here at twenty to twelve, so I must have been near Shoreditch then."

"H'm." Higgins stared thoughtfully at the concrete

floor of the garage. This case was unique in his experience. As a general rule the place where a body was found afforded some slight indication as to where the criminal was at the time of the crime, nothing being harder to move successfully and without comment than a dead body. Yet this man might have been shot anywhere between Glasswell Street, Horton, and Shoreditch. A matter of four miles of bricks and mortar, which possibly housed sixty thousand souls. He turned abruptly to the constable. "Ring up Primrose 44523 and ask Dr. Pape if he would mind coming along. Give him my name, and tell him that the other doctor is not available at the moment, and that I'd like an official opinion."

"Right, sir." The constable moved off to an instrument attached to the garage wall, and Inspector Higgins once more gave his attention to the conductor.

"Do you remember him getting on?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, sir."

Ah! This was better!

"Well?"

"It was at Glasswell Street, sir. Whilst I was clocking on. He surprised me by going on top—there being plenty of room inside."

"Ah! And where did he book to?"

"Threepenny fare, sir. All the way."

"Did you go up to the top again?"

"Once, sir. Penny fare this time."

"And he was all right then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was your second fare a man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did *he* get on?"

"The 'Fox and Hounds,' Horton."

"And where did he alight?"

"A hundred yards farther on, sir."

"What?" Higgins almost shouted in his surprise.

"Yes, sir. He muttered something about having forgotten something. He—he looked—well—er—frightened, sir."

"What was he like?"

"He held a handkerchief to his face, sir. Like as if he had a bad cold. I didn't notice him much getting on, and he got off in such a hurry that I hardly had time to notice him at all."

"His height, man?"

"Well, sir . . ." The other broke off in an effort at recollection.

"Tall? Short? Medium? Was he as big as me?"

"No, sir. He wasn't as tall as you are."

"As big as your caretaker or whatever he calls himself over there?"

"What, Shorty, sir?" The other smiled. "No, sir. He was taller than him—a good bit taller, sir." He looked round at the driver of the bus, then: " I sh'd think he was about George's size, sir."

Inspector Higgins looked at the driver. "Five foot eight?" he queried.

"And a half, sir," responded the other.

"Right. Five feet eight and a half. Dressed?"

"Trilby hat, sir. Overcoat, collar turned up. And—er—yessir, with brown boots."

Higgins turned to the constable, who had returned from ringing up the police surgeon. "Got that? Right. 'Phone the Yard these particulars. Last seen at the 'Fox and Hounds,' Horton, at——" A glance at the conductor.

"About five to eleven, sir."

"Thanks. To be held for enquiry into this business. Jump to it!"

The constable proceeded to the telephone at the double.

"I don't think the second fare knew anything about it, sir," ventured the conductor.

"Oh?" An inflection in his voice, resentful of this comment.

"No, sir. You see, sir, I looked up the steps again after the other chap had got off, and this bloke was all right then."

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH DOCTOR PAPE VOICES AN OPINION

INSPECTOR HIGGINS stared at the man for a moment without making any comment, and debating in his mind whether or no he should countermand his instructions to Scotland Yard *re* the second fare. For one reason, he did not wish to use the vast organisation at his disposal without good cause, and for another, at the moment both Press and public alike were very unforgiving in the event of a mistake. He could well imagine the flaring headlines were the second fare to be apprehended and prove to be innocent of any connection with the case. "SCOTLAND YARD BLUNDERS AGAIN." "ANOTHER INNOCENT MAN QUESTIONED."

Such thoughts were not pleasant, and in any event his would be the head on the charger. Higgins sighed. Ah well! He would have to chance it, for the second fare seemed his only clue. He continued to stare at the conductor, and the man fidgeted under his surveillance.

"So this chap was all right just before eleven, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what made you look up the steps to see if he was all right?"

"Well, sir, I don't know really. It was this second chap what upset me, so to speak. He got on and then got off, after paying his fare, and I knew that this poor chap here was the only other chap on the top deck. I thought perhaps that something was up or—or—something." The man broke off, apparently unable to express his thoughts at the time.

"This second man looked frightened, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Though what there was to frighten him I don't know." The conductor paused, then: "'Course, if this cove had been like he is now I could understand it."

"So could I; but according to you he was still alive. Sure?"

"Positive, sir. He was putting something inside his jacket pocket."

"Aha!" Higgins turned to the constable. "And what did you find in that inside pocket, Constable?"

"A wad o' notes, sir. Here it is, sir. All one-ers."

Inspector Higgins took the bunch of Treasury notes from the constable. He picked out two or three notes haphazard from the bundle and examined each carefully. They seemed genuine enough. He placed the notes in his inside pocket.

"I'll take charge of these, Constable." Once more he resumed his questioning of the conductor. "Anyone else on top of the bus from the time this man got on and your discovery of him dead?"

"No, sir."

"And when did you find out he was dead?"

"Not until we drove into the garage here, sir. Then George here noticed there was a bloke who hadn't got off. We—er—thought that perhaps he was tight or something."

"'Or something' was right, seemingly."

"I went up the steps and was just going to tap him on the shoulder when I saw the blood on his coat, sir. It was awful. I called up George and the two of us carried him down. One of the bus inspectors fetched a doctor, and we called in the constable here who was on duty outside."

"H'm. Now then, I would like you and—er—George here to show me how exactly the man was—er—seated when you found him."

"Certainly, sir." They moved off towards the bus, but the inspector stopped them.

"Not that bus, chapsies. Too—er—too messy. Show me on one of the other buses."

The two bus-men then proceeded to a vehicle of similar type to that on which the man had been found, and, closely followed by the inspector, mounted the steps.

"This is how he was, sir." The conductor suited the action to the word, and seated himself on the back seat to the left at the top of the steps. He slumped in the corner at the side of the bus, and let his hands lie limply on the seat. His legs he stretched out underneath the seat in front, and sagged his chin upon his chest.

"That right, George?"

The driver surveyed with critical eye the ensemble, standing well back to obtain a better view, and turning his head from side to side as though studying the perspective. He stepped forward and placed the conductor's peak-cap more over his eyes, stood back again, then once more moved forward to make a slight adjustment. The conductor grinned sheepishly.

"That's as he was, sir, as far as I can recollect."

Inspector Higgins nodded his thanks, and frowned thoughtfully. Barring the one or two minor adjustments by the driver, both bus-men seemed to agree as to the precise position of the deceased man when found. Yet, if they were right, where was the bullet? It certainly was not in the bus, unless he had overlooked it, which, in all humility, he considered most unlikely. He looked at the posing conductor once more in an effort to gauge the probable flight of the bullet. Yes. It must have been fired from above the level of the top of the bus, and consequently its flight would have been downwards. The bullet must be found in order to establish the type of weapon from which it was fired.

The sudden ringing of an electric bell completely startled the group. Higgins swung round quickly, the

conductor jumped up from the seat, and the driver gave a muttered: " 'Strewth!"

The caretaker, Shorty, could be heard clamping towards the garage door, which he laboriously unbolted and flung open. The inspector immediately recognised the voice of the caller.

"Come along in, Doc," he called out from the top of the bus, leaning over the side. Dr. Pape entered and looked up.

"Hallo, Higgins! Nice time of night to get a respectable citizen out of bed, I *must* say!"

"Sorry, Doc. But when duty calls, you know!" He hurried down the steps and ran to the doctor with extended hand. "Anyhow, I'm much obliged to you for turning out so quickly. I've got something to show you." He led the police surgeon to the body of the unfortunate fare, which the uniformed constable had covered with a dust sheet borrowed from the caretaker. Higgins flung back the sheet.

"I would like your opinion of this."

"Golly!" Dr. Pape snorted his distaste.

"Right, Doc. You get on with your examination whilst I finish with these chaps here." He turned to the bus. "Come along down, you chaps." The two bus-men slowly descended the steps, then hurried to the inspector.

"Reverting once more to this second fare of yours, Conductor. Are you sure his expression could be termed 'frightened'?"

The conductor thought carefully for a moment, then:

"If it wasn't fright, sir, it might have been—well—anger."

"H'm. Sure you're not letting your imagination run away with you? No, no! Don't misunderstand me, please," as the conductor bridled. "You may, both of you, be old enough to be my father, but when you've had my experience in these matters you will realise that the hardest thing in the world is to avoid jumping to conclusions—to prevent, as it were, the wish being father to the thought.

Now, take the case of your second fare. Your first impression—generally right, by the way—was that on coming down the steps his face—er—what is that American word? Oh yes—his face registered fear. This would have been perfectly understandable had this poor fellow here been dead, but he wasn't. Now take it a step further, although considering that this man was alive after your second fare had alighted I don't really see how it *is* a step further. You take another think and say now that the second man's expression might have been anger. But why anger?"

"Ask me another. Anyhow, sir, I'm sticking to what I said, for I believe it to be the truth."

"And might it not be reasonable, sir," suggested the driver. "The conductor says that he got off almost as soon as he got on. I dunno about you, but speaking for meself, I sh'd've been pretty wild if I'd forgotten something and had to get off in a hurry."

"H'm." Higgins considered this explanation, and, coupled with the muttered explanation of the man when alighting, it seemed to hold water.

"Did either of you hear a shot?"

The conductor spoke first, immediately the question had been asked. "No, sir. Of that I'm absolutely positive. In fact, I've been waiting for you to ask me that, and I'm dead sure I didn't."

"What about you, George?"

"Too busy to notice, sir. In any case, I should have taken it for a backfire or something."

"Say, Higgins." It was Dr. Pape speaking. "Did you know this poor devil had been shot twice?"

"What?"

"Yes. Through the neck and in the foot. Look!"

Inspector Higgins looked. There was no doubt about it. In fact the bullet was still in the foot, and——

"Got it! It's the same bullet, Doc. No wonder I couldn't find it. I've been looking all over the bus for that bullet, trying to find where it had gone. Yes. If fired from above

it's quite in accordance with the facts to find it in his foot. Good Lord! I'm getting slow. I never thought of that."

"Glad you're pleased about it," remarked the police surgeon, dryly. "Personally, if I had your job, I would have preferred to find the bullet in the woodwork of the bus. Then at least you could have been sure that the man was killed whilst riding on the bus. Now, for all you know, he may simply have been dumped there."

"Some job that would be, Doc. Come and have a look at the bus. That may make you alter your mind."

"Certainly. But it can't make me alter my mind very well—I haven't made it up yet."

Together they mounted the steps of the bus and the police surgeon gazed at the bloodstained seat for a moment. Then:

"You're right, Higgins. That poor fellow must have been seated here when he was shot. It is obvious. And from the angle of flight it would appear that the shot must have been fired from a height of about—well—say twice the height of the bus. First or possibly second floor of a house on the route, I sh'd say."

"How long's he been dead?"

"About five or six hours, at a rough guess."

Inspector Higgins pulled out his watch and stared at it with surprise.

"Good Lord! I had no idea it was as late as this. Half-past four! I'd better let these poor chaps get along home. Then we want an ambulance." He hurried down the bus steps.

"Constable, take the names and addresses of the driver and conductor, please. Tell them they'll be wanted in due course for the inquest. Also apologise for having kept them so long. Then telephone for an ambulance. Then give me the other contents of the pockets of the deceased."

The constable hurried to carry out his instructions, whilst Inspector Higgins called the caretaker.

"I would like to see the company's records, and get

some other particulars. Can you oblige me with the address of the manager or of someone in authority?"

"Certainly, sir. But if you wait here another half an hour the morning manager will be here. Our company doesn't sleep long, sir. The first buses run out of here just after five."

"Right. I'll be here in any case. Now then, Doc, let's hear what you've got to say."

"Nothing much, Higgins. There's no signs of scorching, so it is fairly apparent that the man was shot from a distance of more than six feet. Then the wound. Caused by a rifle-shot I should say, but I can tell better after I've extracted the bullet. I think I'm right in suggesting that it is not a revolver."

"H'm. Couldn't have been shot from the steps, then."

"I don't think so."

"That lets out the conductor, then. I'm not exactly suspicious of him, but I'm careful. He was pretty quick to deny having heard a shot. Too quick, in my opinion. And—could the shot have been fired from another bus, do you think?"

"Hardly. You forget he was seated on the near side."

"H'm. Your theory of a house seems the most likely up to now. I must look into it." There was a sound of a whistle, then the clanging of doors as the huge garage gates were flung open by the caretaker, and the score of men entered the premises. One and all they made for the still form in the corner. News of the tragedy had already reached them, seemingly. Higgins shrugged his shoulders. They could do no harm provided they did not touch the body, which was most unlikely, and might do some good. He walked over to them.

"Anybody recognise him?"

A man in the uniform of a conductor stepped closer to the body and peered at it intently, then turned with a startled expression on his face.

"Blimey! Yus!"

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH DOCTOR PAPE IS SURPRISED

INSPECTOR HIGGINS looked sharply at the man who had thus asserted his recognition of the body. Like the conductor of the other bus, he was getting on in years, having a seamed, weatherbeaten face with twinkling, intelligent eyes. Higgins felt instinctively that the man could be trusted.

"You recognise him, eh? Well, who is he?"

"I dunno who he is, sir. But I've seen him before—on my bus—once or twice. Funny sort of cove, in my opinion. Gardener or something, I should say. Anyhow, he often wears a buttonhole."

Higgins smiled at this assumption, for if everyone who wore a buttonhole was a gardener, then they must be two a penny!

"Often?"

"Well, sir, he's wore one each time I've seen him. If he hasn't had it on when he's got on the bus, he's put one on during the journey."

Strange! Higgins pondered this for a moment, then:

"How many times in all do you think you've seen him?"

"Three or four."

"H'm. I like your 'often'!" Higgins commented dryly. "And you said once or twice just now." He paused thoughtfully for a moment, then:

"Now think carefully. On those occasions when you *have* seen him, what time of day was it?"

The man considered this for a moment before replying, then answered slowly:

"Latish, sir. Latish."

"Can you be more definite than that?"

"Well, sir, as far as I can recollec', I sh'd say it was when I've had charge of the last bus."

"Ah!" The last bus! He peered intently at the man. "Sure?"

"No, sir. I'm not. But that's the sort o' idea I've got."

And with this Inspector Higgins had to be content. The last bus! What, if anything, was the peculiar significance of this? Would the last bus on this route be crowded or not? Generally speaking, the last bus on any route was full. The manager might be able to enlighten him on this point. And the buttonhole business, and the absence of any clue as to the man's identity—was this deliberate or accidental? There were many lines of investigation open to him, none of which would seem to lead anywhere. This man would be posted as missing by his anxious relatives very soon, and this, to Inspector Higgins, seemed his best bet. Unless, of course, anything came of that second fare.

Whilst the inspector was thus cogitating, the ambulance drew into the garage yard, and with all due solemnity and with the utmost reverence the unfortunate victim was conveyed to the mortuary. As the ambulance left the garage, the car of the manager pulled into the yard, and a short, fussy, well-dressed man stepped therefrom.

"An accident?" he queried, of no one in particular.

"Not exactly, sir," replied Higgins, walking towards the car.

"What d'ye mean 'Not exactly'! And who the deuce are you?"

Inspector Higgins produced his official card, which the other accepted with a flourish.

"Inspector Higgins. Ah! H'm! Step inside, please." He preceded the inspector to a small office, the door of which he opened with a key from a bunch taken from his pocket, and ushered him into a chair. Then he lit the gas-fire, closed the window, turned up his coat-collar, shuddered, and turned to Higgins.

"Brrrh! It's damned cold. Well, what can I do for you, sir?"

Briefly the inspector outlined the tragedy, and unfolded his story without interruption, save for sundry "Tut-tuts," and "Dear me's," from the manager. When he had finished:

"And what, exactly, do you want from me, Inspector?"

"First of all, sir, particulars of this bus-route. X87. Is it a busy route, for instance?"

"X87, eh? No, sir. It is *not* a busy route. Far from it. It doesn't pay, sir. It doesn't pay. It is what we call an easy route. Every conductor on this route is within a year or two of his pension. Elderly fellows glad of the rest. Few passengers, sir. Ruinous route, I call it."

"Then why operate it, sir?"

"Why?" the manager shouted, his eyes protruding with the intensity of his feelings. "Why? Because we have to. If we only ran the routes which paid, half the buses would be taken off the London streets. But we supply service, sir. And service is not always remunerative. Yet these slack routes have one good aspect. It enables us to give some of our older employees an easier task."

Higgins had been an interested auditor of this peroration. For the first time in his life he realised that the London Transport Corporation had a soul—that this vast organisation was human enough to give its old servants easier jobs. Then he wondered whether the fact that it was an easy route had any bearing on its use by the murdered man. Did he travel on the top deck to avoid contact with other passengers? He must make a note of that.

"Now, sir. A further question or two. The conductor in question, Charles Northcote—what can you tell me of him?"

"Northcote—Northcote. H'm." The manager pulled open the drawer of a card-index and "walked" down the

tabulated letters with the first and second fingers of his right hand until the letter N was reached. A moment's search, then he withdrew a card. "Here we are, Inspector. Northcote. Born 18—— Good Lord! Due for his pension next year! More expense! Still, a good man. Served us faithfully and well since we started. H'm. Good Lord! I wonder whether we are liable for damages if a fellow gets murdered on one of our buses. I must look up the point. Dear me! I hadn't thought of that. Inspector, this is serious!"

Higgins surveyed the man for a moment amusedly. For the first time since its recital the tale seemed to have struck home at the manager, and through the pocket of his company. He smiled.

"You're quite right, sir. It *is* serious. Now then, sir. It's easy enough to calculate the average rate of progress of the bus during its journey from Glasswell Street to the garage here, but can you tell me the greatest rate at which the bus would travel on that journey?"

"Twelve miles per hour, Inspector," replied the manager promptly. "You see, under your Police Regulations" —he bowed formally—"we are forbidden to exceed this speed. Of course, some of our drivers might do so, but we are not responsible for that."

"Thank you, sir. That is all the information I require."

Inspector Higgins left the manager's office to find Dr. Pape waiting impatiently outside.

"Come along, Higgins. I've been waiting in case you want a lift back to the Yard."

"That's very kind, Doc. Shan't keep you a moment."

The inspector then gave a few instructions to the constable, and arranged with the responsible official that the bus of the tragedy should not be sent into service for a few days. Then, having gathered up the few worldly possessions of the murdered man, he called to the police surgeon, and a few seconds later was bowling westwards in

his car. For the first few minutes there was silence, then:

"Well, Higgins, old top, I'd sooner it were you than me."

Inspector Higgins awoke from his reverie with a start, but responded good-naturedly:

"What-d'you mean, Doc?"

"This murder. Nothing much to go on, as far as I can make out."

"Oh, I dunno! Might be better, of course: then again, it might be a dam' sight worse."

"I'm glad you're so cheery about it."

"It doesn't do to give up hope so early in the game, Doc. If we did we should never get anywhere. Take this case, for instance. We know the chap was killed from a hundred yards or so past the 'Fox and Hounds,' Horton, to the garage. Somewhere in between, I mean. Now, according to the first doctor, who saw the man within half an hour of the bus's return to the garage, he had been dead about an hour. The bus returned at eleven forty-five. It follows, therefore, that the poor fellow was shot about a quarter past eleven. Right! Now then—we must make due allowances for the doctor's estimate of the time of death. After all, it is so very easy to say one hour when perhaps fifty minutes would have been nearer the mark. In any case, with all due respect, you doctors can only be approximate—I mean to say, you cannot be definite enough—you cannot say without fear of contradiction that a man died at exactly eleven and a half minutes past the hour—or some similar time." He paused, but the police surgeon made no comment, then resumed: "Now where were we? Oh, I know! This poor chap died between say eleven and eleven-fifteen. He was all right at eleven when the conductor took the trouble to go up the steps to see. The man was shot in the back of the neck. What does that tell us? That the murderer was a good shot. Must have been, with a moving target. Then again—it was the last bus. It was dark, and to hit any target requires light. We

may therefore safely assume that the shot was fired just after the bus had passed a lamp-post."

"I wonder"—casually from Dr. Pape.

"Why?"

"What about the lamp on the bus which lights up the indicator board at the rear?"

"A good point, Doc, but it won't hold water. I've tried that. There is a lamp at the back of the bus, but it will not illuminate the head and shoulders of anyone sitting in the rear seat."

"I see."

"To resume: According to your theory, the shot was fired from the first or second floor of a house on the route. From eleven to eleven-fifteen the bus travelled about a mile, attaining at various points a speed not exceeding twelve miles an hour. In that mile there are possibly sixty lamp-posts. Of these say thirty are on the left-hand side—the side the man was sitting. We cannot, of course, rule out the others, but we'll deal with these thirty first. We can therefore assume that the man or woman who fired the shot was in a room of a house almost level with one of these thirty lamp-posts. Again: it is more than likely that whoever fired the shot was not an exceptionally fine marksman—therefore he would need to be in a house, near a lamp, just before or just after a recognised stop on the route—where the bus has slowed down or has not yet picked up its speed. Our search is now considerably narrowed."

"Excellent, Higgins. Sounds almost too easy. I suppose there can't be more than half a dozen of such houses which meet with all your requirements." He paused for a moment, then: "But why return to the Yard if you've progressed so far?"

"I'm not, Doc. I asked your chauffeur to drop me at the police station, and here we are. Thank you very much." Without more ado, Inspector Higgins nodded to the police surgeon, opened the door of the car, and alighted.

"Well, of all the damned cheek!" Dr. Pape muttered weakly, then relapsed into the comfortably upholstered seat of his car.

. . . . . .

Five minutes later Inspector Higgins had completed his explanations to the superintendent of the police station, and arrangements for an intensive search of certain houses along the route were quickly made. Two police cars were placed at the inspector's disposal, and, with a dozen plain-clothes men, at once proceeded to the "Fox and Hounds," Horton, which was to be the rendezvous. Following the route of the X87 buses, Inspector Higgins carried into effect his theory of the lamps, and dropped his men in pairs at such of the houses which seemed to fulfil his requirements: *i. e.,* near a lamp and just before or just after a recognised stop on the route.

The men had definite instructions. Had anyone on the first or second floor a sporting rifle or other gun? Had they a licence? Serious matter to carry a gun without a licence! As a matter of fact someone had reported that a shot had been fired late last night, and they had been sent to clear the matter up. Any information would be paid for. Names and addresses of all the tenants were to be obtained, and all other available particulars which might be of use in an investigation. Anyone filling the bill to be taken to the station for enquiry.

Having stationed his men, Inspector Higgins returned to the "Fox and Hounds" to await developments, and a long and dreary wait it was! In due course the men drifted back to the rendezvous—each pair reporting failure. A considerable amount of information as to the sundry tenants had, however, been accumulated, and—having returned with the men to the station, thanked the superintendent for his assistance, and left instructions for the remaining houses on the route to be investigated—Inspector Higgins returned with this information to Scotland Yard for it to be thoroughly sifted.

On such a job Sergeant Mercier was invaluable. Before the day was over he had reported to the inspector that, whilst some of the tenants were not exactly desirable citizens, each one was what he purported to be. Inspector Higgins turned over to a subordinate the questioning of such of the tenants as Sergeant Mercier suggested were 'doubtful,' and gave instructions that he was not to be disturbed.

Then he lit his pipe and reviewed the case from the comfort of his office chair. There was, indeed, little to go upon. Mercier had reported that the murdered man was not on the files at the Yard, so seemingly he had been respectable—or lucky. (This was Higgins the cynic!) There was no means of identification, yet—half a mo'! The stuff found on him. This had been looked over by the constable who had first arrived at the garage, but had not yet been officially enquired into by Scotland Yard. Inspector Higgins walked to his overcoat and removed a parcel therefrom. This he carefully unwrapped and strewed its contents upon his desk in front of him.

A packet of cigarettes of a well-known brand, a matchbox with seven matches in it, two bus tickets, the wad of notes, one half-crown, one shilling, and fivepence in coppers. (At the inquest this identical list was published, save that the word "bronze" was substituted for the word "coppers." Sergeant Mercier always insisted that this substitution was accounted for by the reluctance of policemen to use the word "coppers"!)

The wad of notes. According to the conductor, when he mounted the steps after the mysterious second fare had alighted, the murdered man was putting something inside his jacket pocket. And this wad of notes had been found therein! Was there any connection between the two men? Would the frightened expression of the second fare be accounted for by the fact that he had seen the murdered man handling this bundle of notes, and, being hard up,

had decided to "flee from temptation"? The theory was ingenious, if weak-kneed.

The bundle was at least half-an-inch thick, and the notes were old Treasury notes, still legal tender, although the new Bank of England notes were well in circulation. Mechanically, Inspector Higgins started to count them . . . ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred!

One hundred pounds exactly.

"Rum!" muttered the inspector.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS TAKES A BUS-RIDE

INSPECTOR HIGGINS opened the right-hand drawer of his desk and took out a rubber band, which he stretched round the bundle of notes. Then he turned his attention to the bus-tickets. One was quite new, and underneath its distinctive number at the top was printed in small type: "Service X87." This was obviously the ticket purchased by the unfortunate man the previous evening, for it was punched at the fare stage—Glasswell Street to Garage. Further proof of his journey, if any were required.

The other ticket was old and badly rubbed, as though it had been left in the man's pocket for a considerable time. Higgins picked it up, and was mildly surprised to find that the ticket related to the same bus service, X87, and was punched for the identical journey. What could be deduced from this? It was obvious that the journey had been undertaken before, so one might assume that the business for which it was undertaken was also the same. Then the place where the man had boarded the bus, Glasswell Street—could one assume that this was near to the home of the deceased? Either that or it was his nearest point of contact with Route No. X87. Was Glasswell Street near a railway station, and, if so, what was the line? Worth looking into. And another thing . . .

Inspector Higgins nodded in his chair, and a few moments later was sound asleep, which, considering that he had not retired at all the previous night, was not surprising.

. . . . . .

He awoke with a start, his limbs cramped and chilled to

the marrow. His instructions that he was not to be disturbed had been faithfully carried out. He stood up, walked to the switch on the opposite wall near to the door, avoiding by instinct the chair near his desk, and turned on the electric light. The resultant glare dazzled his eyes for a brief moment, and he frowned portentously; then, his eyes becoming accustomed to the light, he pulled out his gun-metal watch and stared at the dial unbelievingly.

"Great Pontius Pilate!"

A quarter to ten! He had been asleep for—goodness knows how long! He shook his head shudderingly, striving to collect his scattered thoughts. He glanced at his desk. At least no one had pinched the bundle of notes whilst he had been asleep! One must be thankful for small mercies. The bus-tickets, too. Again he glanced at his watch, but this time merely to make a mental calculation of the time it should take for him to reach Glasswell Street. Yes! He could do it comfortably.

Inspector Higgins removed his hat and coat from a peg on the wall of his room, then, having locked the money in his desk, together with the bus-tickets, he gave a final glance round the room, then closed the door.

His exit from the Yard was not entirely without incident, for his unexpected passage through the waiting-room caused consternation to four constables seated at a table therein, and broke up, precipitously, what looked suspiciously like an unauthorised game of cards. However, his curt "Good-night" and his apparent obliviousness of the untoward happening not only closed the incident, but sent up his stock, in the minds of the constables, at least fifty per cent.

Inspector Higgins had, from long experience, become convinced that a crime was best solved on the spot. Theorising in the armchair of his room helped, of course, but to obtain results it was necessary to be on the actual place where the crime was committed. Thus, when he found that he had slept so long, he at once decided that, being more or

less refreshed, he himself would undertake the journey on the last bus from Glasswell Street to the garage. What exactly he expected to gain from this Inspector Higgins could not have said, but at least it might create an atmosphere conducive to thought. In other words, the journey might produce an inspiration! And again, reflected the inspector gloomily, it might not!

He arrived at Glasswell Street about ten twenty, and at once interrogated a policeman on duty near by as to the name of the nearest railway stations.

"Yes, sir. Horton Station's just round the corner. Ten minutes' run from Fenchurch Street."

"Thanks. I'm much obliged."

So there was a railway station near at hand! Had the murdered man travelled up from town? Another point to be remembered.

Inspector Higgins took up his stand at stage number fourteen near the clock affixed to the wall at the corner of Glasswell Street, and enquired of each conductor who brought his card to be stamped by the automatic time machine whether or no he was "the last bus."

A neighbouring clock chimed the quarter before eleven when a bus of Route X87 drew up to the curb and the conductor quickly alighted and ran to the clock.

"Excuse me——" began Inspector Higgins, then recognised the man as the conductor of the fatal bus of the previous evening. The recognition was mutual.

"Hallo sir. Can't stop now. We're five minutes late already. You'd better travel by my bus if you wish to talk to me."

"That is my intention. Provided, of course, that you are the last bus."

"We're that, right enough, sir."

"Good." Inspector Higgins mounted the steps of the bus closely followed by the conductor. The top deck was unoccupied, although he noted that there were three passengers inside. The conductor rang the bell and the bus

started, jerking the inspector into a seat. He recovered his balance, then seated himself on the rear seat on the near side. A minute later the bus stopped and the conductor called out the stopping-place: "Foxanounds! Foxanounds!"

Higgins remembered with a start that this was the place where the second fare had embarked, and gazed round the darkness to try and see if the place would stimulate inspiration. The "Fox and Hounds" was just an ordinary public-house, typical of the district, with one or two animated groups or erstwhile customers still arguing some abstruse problem, in spite of the fact that it was nearly an hour since they had been ejected from the public-house as near after ten as the harassed publican could manage. An adjacent horse-trough tended to remind one that the licence was old-established.

The bus moved on.

A few seconds later the conductor ran up the steps.

"This is where that bloke got off, sir."

"Thanks." Another search for information or inspiration—but little doing, save that the inspector remarked that it seemed an absurd place to alight from a bus unless one wanted a house on either side of the road, for there was no turning since the "Fox and Hounds," and there did not appear to be another for some distance. He asked the conductor, to make sure.

"No, sir. No turning till we get to Andover Street. It's a quarter of a mile stretch from the 'Foxanounds' to there."

"H'm. Thanks. Now don't bother me again until we get to the garage. I want to study the houses as we pass—for between here and home the poor chap was shot."

Inspector Higgins stared intently at the first floors of the houses as the bus passed, paying particular attention to those near a lamp, and noted that most of the rooms were lighted by gas, and that at this time of night few of the occupants had retired.

He would have given a great deal to have known from which room the fatal shot had been fired, for this must be the first step to find the murderer.

"Ah well!"

There was a break in the clouds overhead, and a glorious moon, just past the full, slowly slid into view, and lit up the street with a pale luminance. Inspector Higgins leaned back in his seat and scowled at it malevolently. "Damnation!"

His wonderful theory of the houses near the lamps was completely shattered, for the moon was strong enough to light up the top of the bus, and so now, instead of just about half a dozen houses, every house on the route was suspect. "Why the blazes didn't I think of that before?" he muttered. He called down to the conductor, who quickly mounted the steps.

"Was there a moon last night?" he queried, without preamble.

"Yessir. A lovely moon. It was a glorious evening."

"H'm." Higgins stared at the moon abstractedly, whilst the conductor fidgeted on the top step; then, after a few minutes of silence, the inspector noticed him.

"Hallo! Still here?" he asked unnecessarily.

The man retreated a few steps and then remounted them. It was immediately apparent to Higgins that the man had something to say, but was a bit dubious as to how to say it.

"What's up, old chap?" he asked encouragingly.

"Well, sir, it's like this. I thought of something in bed this morning which may not have anything to do with last night, of course, sir, but I thought perhaps—you see, sir . . ."

"Come along, man! Let's have it!"

"It's nothing much really, sir, but . . ."

"That's all right. It may be useful. Spit it out," he encouraged coarsely.

"Well, sir, it's like this . . ."

"So you remarked before."

"That cove who was killed last night, sir, had a rose in his buttonhole when he got on the bus, sir."

"Good Lord, man! Is that all?"

"No, sir. What struck me was this: when we lifted the poor chap down his buttonhole was gone."

"Ah!" Inspector Higgins remained thoughtful for a moment or two. What was it that other conductor had said about a buttonhole? "If he hasn't had it on when he's got on the bus, he's put one on during the journey." Yes. Those were the man's words. Something fishy about this buttonhole business! Not the fact that the man made a habit of wearing one, but that he sometimes put one on during the journey, and sometimes discarded it during the journey. Suddenly:

"Got it!"

"What, sir?" queried the conductor, open-mouthed.

"Nothing," responded Higgins mendaciously.

Without a doubt the buttonhole served as a signal.

But of what? . . . And of whom? . . .

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS ENTERS AN EMPTY HOUSE

THE bus swung through the garage gates and Inspector Higgins alighted, and as soon as the conductor had handed in his tickets and timesheet he engaged him once more in conversation.

"I may have asked you before, but will you please tell me whether or not the top of the bus is ever crowded?"

"Very rarely, sir," replied the conductor. "You see, sir," he went on in explanation, "this route is what we term an easy route, for the main reason that there are so few top-deckers. It ain't as though we're a country route, sir. Far from it. People use our bus for business travel only. No one would dream of going for what is generally known as a bus-ride on our route. Neighbourhood not nice enough. Even on the top there's not much *fresh* air. A top-decker is an exception rather than the rule. That's why our buses have no covered tops, sir."

"I see. Thanks. I'll be getting along."

Inspector Higgins left the garage and started to walk back over the X87 route. Now that the moon had upset his calculations as to the houses from which the shot might have been fired he wished to have another look.

He proceeded slowly, making a mental note of such houses as he deemed worthy of further investigation, and a pencilled note of such as were unlighted, for, he argued within himself, the shot must have come from an unlighted house with an open window, and an unlighted house of the previous evening was scarcely likely to be lit up to-night. Not exactly sound reasoning, perhaps, but it would at least hold water.

Suddenly he stopped, astounded to find a house in complete darkness. Furthermore, it was empty, which, considering the densely populated area, was of itself a strange phenomenon. There was a notice pasted on the wall, and Inspector Higgins pulled out an electric torch the better to read it. It proved to be a printed notice of the sanitary inspector's condemning the property as unfit for human habitation. The windows were blackened with dust and smoke (such as were still whole), but the majority had been broken, in all probability by the more exuberant youth of the locality.

Inspector Higgins mounted the four front steps and tried the front door. It was immovable, as he had expected. Then he descended the dozen odd steps to the area door, which he pushed gently. This also did not move. He peered through the broken window of the area, but could see little but dust and sundry balls and tops of the more careless of the children of the neighbourhood. The window being barred accounted for the fact that these toys had not been retrieved by their presumably adventurous owners.

The area itself was littered with all sorts of rubbish: sheets of newspapers, bits of torn posters and placards, innumerable bus-tickets, a filthy cap, an old boot, some dried leaves and some confetti. To the inspector the dried leaves were an inexplicable phenomenon, whilst the presence of confetti in this dead house seemed almost sacrilege.

There was also a spot of oil.

Not a piece of confetti, as Higgins had at first believed, but a spot of oil. The reflected moonlight revealed it.

Darned funny. Higgins gazed upwards to see from whence the drop had fallen, and found himself staring at the underside of the steps to the front door. Ergo, whoever had dropped that globule of oil had been in the area. Very careless! And why oil? Higgins glanced at the back door, to discover immediately that its hinges

had recently been oiled. Aha! "Let me see now!" he reflected. "When I tried this door just now I merely pushed it. I should have turned the handle." He gripped the doorhandle and turned it gently.

The door swung open without a sound.

Inspector Higgins did not immediately enter—not that he was afraid, for he had the average, possibly more than the average, stock of courage. It was merely that he was a great believer in the old adage that discretion is the better part of valour. Furthermore, he had learned as a child a pleasant little ditty about a spider and a fly. The word "fly" had often been used in connection with the inspector, but always as an adjective—never as a noun. (He was considered a "fly" cop by most of the denizens of the underworld with whom he had come into contact.) Yet here was an open door simply crying for investigation!

Higgins tiptoed to the top of the area steps in the hope of finding a constable on the beat. He waited ten minutes, but had no luck. He dared not leave the place in case whoever was inside (if anyone *was* inside) should leave the place unnoticed. One by one the lights of adjacent houses were extinguished, and the traffic and pedestrians seemed to have ceased entirely. A belated taxi came bowling along, and Higgins ran to intercept it, but the driver merely shook his head (to discourage whom he imagined to be a prospective fare) and accelerated. The inspector swore luridly and made a mental note of the number of the cab.

He felt in his pockets for a sheet of paper on which to write a note, but decided that this would be useless without a messenger to deliver the note. He waited three more minutes, then gave it up. He would enter the place alone, but must leave some signal to the constable on the beat when he should arrive. He removed his bowler hat, then, with a sigh of regret at the needless waste of estimable headgear, he jabbed it on to one of the spikes of

the railings protecting the area. Then he descended once more the area steps, opened the door and entered, leaving the door wide open. At any rate, he reflected, the hat should awaken the constable's curiosity, whilst the open door should clinch any suspicions which might be aroused.

"Well, here goes!"

He proceeded warily along the passage from the area door. The floor-boards were badly rotted, and he began to feel dubious as to whether they would bear his great weight. The walls were so dilapidated that the wonder was not so much that the house had been declared unfit for human habitation but that it had not collapsed long before this. There was a room on his right, but he had no need to open the door—in fact, this was impossible, for the door was no longer there, the rusty hinges alone remaining—and it needed but a mere flash of his torch to ascertain that the room was empty. It was the room he had peered into from the area.

Then the accident happened.

Inspector Higgins should certainly have exercised more care, but the chief blame lay at the feet of some diminutive citizen who was careless enough to throw a wooden ball through the window at some earlier date and from whence it had rolled through the doorway of the room into the passage outside. Higgins, having flashed his lamp into the room, turned to proceed further along the passage, took one step forward, then trod on the ball. He let out a yell of apprehension as he lost his balance, flung out his arms wildly, then fell to the floor with a resounding thud which shook the very foundations of the house, and lay there for a few seconds, completely winded.

His language was fulsome.

He picked himself from off the floor, and found that his clothes were covered with dust and dirt. He also noted with the aid of his torch the offending ball, which he kicked in disgust. The noise he had made already must have warned any illegal occupant of the house of his

presence, so that further attempts at concealment would be futile. He fixed the button of his torch so that a permanent beam of light was emitted, then ascended the stairs with great care, testing each before entrusting his weight thereon. The third, seventh and tenth stairs were missing, whilst the fifth cracked ominously under the strain as he stepped upon it. At the top of the stairs was the front door, which was not only locked and bolted, but had been screwed into position. Inspector Higgins had intended leaving this door open, but had to abandon the idea.

The next flight of steps were in a slightly better state of repair; nevertheless, he mounted them warily. He found no signs that they had been recently used, but the fact that there was no dust thereon seemed to indicate that they might have been.

He opened a door at the top of the first flight of stairs from the front door, and entered a room which certainly showed signs of recent habitation. The floor was covered with dust and there were numerous footprints all round the room. There was a rickety deal table in the centre of the room, and two backless chairs. Upon the table was an empty whisky-bottle.

Higgins nodded to himself as he guessed at the recent occupant. A tramp, without a doubt. Cheap if comfortless lodgings. It accounted for the oil on the hinges of the area door, although where it had been obtained was a mystery. Pinched, probably! And the dustless stairs? Possibly swept by the wind from the landing window-frame.

At any rate, the house was empty now, barring himself. He shouted facetiously up the stairs:

"Anybody at home?"

Inspector Higgins then stepped to the window and peered through the broken panes. Anyone standing here could certainly see the passengers on top of a bus, especially with the moon as bright as it was. There would

be no need to have an open window, either, for the panes were practically non-existent.

He could just see the area railings. Yes. There was his bowler hat doing its best. Sheer waste. Then Inspector Higgins noticed a constable with measured tread strolling majestically down the street, and smilingly awaited developments.

What would be the man's reaction on finding the open door?

The constable came slowly nearer, and Higgins was somewhat intrigued to discover that the man was smoking a surreptitious cigarette. Still, being one-thirty a. m., there was, perhaps, little harm done.

Suddenly the constable stopped. He had obviously seen the hat. He walked forward to investigate, and, using both hands, wrenched the battered bowler from the railing-spike. He then inspected the hat carefully, pulling out the lining and punching it into shape. Then he shook his head from side to side, either at the waste of such a perfectly good hat, or because it was past redemption, held it for a moment or two in his right hand, then pitched it into the gutter. His measured tread resumed, in three minutes he was out of sight.

"Well—I'll—be—damned!"

Inspector Higgins stared at the corner round which the constable had disappeared, and cursed wonderingly beneath his breath. Now that there was no sign of life in the street below there was an eerie sense of desolation about the house. Still, now that he was here he intended to make a thorough investigation. And it might as well be done in comfort. He would follow the worthy constable's advice. He pulled out his pipe and started to fill it, lethargically. Lord! He'd been in some funny situations in his time (mechanically he released the button of his torch and placed it in his pocket), and some pretty tight ones, too. Excluding the war, when everybody else had been in the same boat, there had been many occasions

when his life had been endangered. Gosh! But some people had some funny jobs. Still, life was all the better for a little excitement, provided, of course, that one did not get too much of it. His first real scrap had been just before the war, soon after he had joined the Force, and he had been frightened to death. Still, it was wonderful the sense of security which a uniform provided. It was as if one knew that the entire Force was behind one. This sense of security remained, though in a much diminished form, when one discarded the uniform to become a plain-clothes man. True, the public, criminal and non-criminal, had not the same respect for a non-uniformed man, so that one had to discount the moral support which a uniform provided; yet, as most plain-clothes men worked in pairs, the matter was evened up. There is, and always has been, a certain glory in working single-handed, but "Give me a pal, every time!" reflected Higgins.

He struck a match and lit his pipe.

A neighbouring clock struck two, and the chorus was taken up by sundry other clocks in the distance. Remarkable how sound carries on a still night!

Then complete and utter quietude.

A soft thud, five quick footsteps across the floor overhead, and silence again.

Then Inspector Higgins, to his own intense disgust, felt his hair rise on end!

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH A PIECE OF WOOD COMES IN HANDY

"GOSH!" Inspector Higgins had been holding his breath unwittingly since the sound of the footsteps, and now he slowly emitted it through puffed cheeks. So there was an occupant!

He tiptoed to the door of the room and carefully pushed it until it was almost closed. Then he waited. Whoever was upstairs at this moment was in for a nasty shock upon descending.

The wait was becoming wearisome, yet Higgins was loth to go up the stairs after the intruder, for in such circumstances the advantage is always with the man coming down, and a live constable is infinitely preferable to a dead (or disabled) inspector!

After a wait of five minutes, nothing having happened, Inspector Higgins began to have some slight misgiving that the intruder upstairs might be cognisant of his presence. Then it occurred to him that whoever was overhead must know he was in the house unless the person had arrived after him. And if the man had arrived after him, why had he not been warned by the open area door?

There was something distinctly fishy here! Still, if it developed into a waiting game, Higgins was quite prepared to back himself against all comers, for he had infinite patience when it suited his book. In ordinary, everyday matters he was as impatient as the average man. For example, he preferred to walk rather than wait for a bus, even though in due course he was overtaken by that bus and actually continued his journey in it. A late train also roused his ire, as did a hesitant witness. In

the minor things of life patience was not his virtue, but in the things that matter Job was an also-ran compared with the inspector. He had waited for years for a certain criminal, high in society, to make a slip, and that man was now languishing at Dartmoor. On another occasion Inspector Higgins and a desperate criminal had, by a peculiar combination of circumstances, become locked together in a dark room in which neither could see the other, yet each was aware of the other's presence. Sound alone was of any use, and it developed into a waiting game for one or the other to make some sound and thus betray his exact location. The criminal's nerve had broken first and Higgins got his man. Another time——

Hsst! Movement at last!

Inspector Higgins applied his ear to the crack of the door, nerving himself for the attack he proposed to make as soon as the intruder reached the doorway, and, with one hand upon the doorhandle, made ready to fling open the door at the crucial moment. He listened with bated breath. Without doubt there was movement of some kind in the house. Stealthy footsteps. . . .

"Hell!" murmured the inspector, as his ears became attuned to the shuffling sounds. The footsteps were coming *up* the stairs!

"Lumme! There's two on 'em!" he muttered, ungrammatically.

This was serious. He didn't mind in the least taking on both of the intruders, but he was somewhat apprehensive as to the possible outcome. The footsteps shuffled nearer—the man was now in the passage—a rustling upon the wall outside the room indicated that the man was feeling his way along the passage. Inspector Higgins tightened his grip of the doorknob—ready for anything. The footsteps ceased, and the inspector could hear the steady breathing of the man outside the door. Then he felt a pressure on the doorhandle, and it turned slightly in his grasp. He tensed his muscles, ready to spring.

The pressure on the knob suddenly ceased, there was a quick intake of breath by the man outside, then the handle slowly returned to normal.

Now what? Did that sudden intake of breath indicate that the man realised that all was not well within the room?

A brief pause—then the resumption of the footsteps along the passage to the bottom of the flight of stairs leading to the floor above. Inspector Higgins was puzzled. Now that the crisis had been postponed a minor reaction set in. He relaxed his muscles and released his hold on the doorknob.

"What the devil's up with 'em?" Inspector Higgins, who a few moments previously had been priding himself upon the patience which he exercised on such occasions as this, was becoming rattled. Why had the man abandoned his obvious intention to enter the room and proceeded to the bottom of the stairs, where, as far as Higgins could make out, he was still waiting? There was a nigger in the woodpile! But was the man still waiting at the bottom of the next flight of stairs? Was it not possible that he had joined forces with the "footsteps" above and even now the pair were creeping noiselessly along the passage contemplating a joint attack upon his person?

Not a comforting thought! Perhaps they were both armed. That would be bad—very bad! For Inspector Higgins rarely carried firearms, and certainly had not done so when he left the Yard to catch the last bus to the garage.

Not a sound. Then the inspector had another devastating thought. Supposing that the pair had joined forces, and, far from contemplating an attack, were more concerned with getting away unnoticed. It would be a fine thing if he were to remain in this room with the door closed whilst the two of them calmly walked out of the house.

Curse it! If he could only see what they were up to! If only one of them would make a sound! If only the second intruder (who might or might not be at the bottom of the next flight of stairs) would give some sign of his presence!

"Too many 'ifs' in this game—better make sure," he reflected.

Once more he gripped the doorknob and began gently to turn it. As soon as the catch of the lock cleared the socket he edged the door towards him for about half an inch, then silently released his hold on the handle. Then, with infinite care and an earnest hope that the door would open noiselessly, he began to pull the door towards him. At last it was sufficiently wide for him to pass through should he so desire, yet he waited a few moments fully expecting a concerted rush from the stairs. Nothing doing!

Slowly and quietly he leaned forward an inch at a time, his head turned in the direction of the stairs, until at last with one eye he gazed down the passage. It was too dark to see anything at all. He leaned still further out of the doorway, peering blindly into the darkness.

Something hard and heavy crashed on his skull.

. . . . . .

A very brief period of insensibility, then Inspector Higgins was brought back to consciousness by a bright light shining on his face. His head ached abominably and he felt sick, yet he determined to "play possum" for a few minutes until his head had cleared, then to make an effort to come to grips with his assailant.

"Ber-limey!" A voice tinged with awe and a large measure of apprehension made this seemingly involuntary ejaculation.

"What's up, mate?"

(Two of them! So they *had* united forces. Higgins abandoned for the time being his intention to force an attack.)

" 'Strewth! How the devil was I to know he'd be mixed up in this?"

"What are you driving at, man?"

"It—it's old Higgins!" The words came with a rush, and the inspector, hearing his name, concentrated his reeling brain on the voice, and immediately recognised it. He sat up, blinking into the ray of an electric torch.

"A—a—are you all right, sir?"

"You—poor—mutt!" A wealth of invective in the voice, yet the effort of speaking sent an excruciating pain through his head, and with a weary gesture the inspector gripped his temples, then ran his hands through his hair, and gingerly felt a sizeable bump at the back of his head.

"Who's with you, Goldfinch?"

"Constable Smart, sir."

A brief period during which Inspector Higgins made a valiant effort to collect his thoughts, then:

"Did you get the others?"

"There was only one, sir. He escaped down the drain-pipe at the back. We didn't worry much, sir. You see, we—er—we thought that—er—we thought that as we'd got one of you—er—that is, sir . . ." The man broke off, completely at a loss, but Inspector Higgins knew exactly what he was trying to say. Not being aware of Higgins's identity, they had assumed that he was one of a pair of malefactors, and as such could be made to reveal the identity of the other who had escaped. A reasonable explanation, perhaps, yet it did not help to diminish the lump at the back of his head!

"Tell me all about it, please."

"Yessir, b—but—you know, sir, I'm awfully sorry about—er——"

"Cut it out!"

"Well, sir. Chief Dryan sent us."

"What on earth for?"

"You see, sir, the superintendent of Horton Station

wanted some help in examining some houses between the 'Fox and Hounds' and the bus terminus. We were on our way to the station for instructions when we saw a cove come in here. He acted suspicious-like, gazing up and down the street, and dodged in. He must have seen us, but we were a fair distance off. When we found it was an empty house we thought we'd better investigate, sir."

"I see. Go on."

"We went down the area steps and entered the house by the door there, same as the other chap had done."

"Was it closed?"

"Yessir."

"H'm. Fire away."

"There was no sign of him at all, sir. We went up the first flight of stairs to the front door. Then we crept up the next flight. I picked up a lump of wood in the basement, in case it might be needed, sir——"

"Quite." A grim interruption from the inspector.

"——And we got up the next flight without seeing the man. We were crawling——"

"On hands and knees?"

"No, sir. I meant tiptoeing along quietly——"

"I see."

"——Quietly along the passage when we saw part of the passage was not so pitch-black as the rest of it was. We saw then that it was a door opening, sir. It must have been the twilight from the window which enabled us to see the doorway, sir. Then I saw someone stick out his head, fishy-like, sir, and—and——"

"The lump of wood came in useful, eh?"

"Well, sir," said the other, apologetically, "I thought you were the fellow we saw going in, sir, and when you poked your head out of the door you nearly frightened me to death, sir. I lashed out unthinkingly, sir. I'm—awfully sorry, sir. I . . ."

Inspector Higgins winced at the recollection. "Go on. Then what?"

"You let out an awful yell when you dropped, sir, and a bloke what was further along the passage started running, sir. We stumbled along in the dark, and were just in time to see him in the moonlight disappearing over a wall further down the road. We let him go, sir, and came back to you. That's all, sir."

There was silence for a few moments. Constable Goldfinch's recital had finished upon such a note of lugubrious interrogation that Inspector Higgins, in spite of his recent maltreatment, was able to see a funny side to the narrative.

"And now what?" he queried. "You've let an ostensible or potential criminal slip through your fingers; you've injured—possibly for weeks—a detective-inspector of Scotland Yard. What's the next item on your programme?"

The other made no attempt at reply, but Inspector Higgins, for his part, did not expect one. His brain was rapidly clearing, and he was more inclined to take a philosophical view of the incident.

"You say there was only one man who escaped. What about the other fellow who was upstairs?"

"Upstairs, sir?"

"Other fellow, sir?"

Both Constable Goldfinch and Constable Smart seemed surprised at the question. Inspector Higgins rose to his feet with a sigh.

"I only hope, for both your sakes, that he hasn't escaped whilst we've been holding an inquest here. Now then, you two. One of you guard the window out of which the other fellow escaped. The other—I think it had better be you, Goldfinch—stop in the floor below to prevent any escape by the back door." He squared his shoulders. "I'll go upstairs and see if this fellow is still there."

"Are you sure you're all right, sir?" queried Constable Goldfinch. "I'll go if you like."

"No. I'd better go. You're much too handy with pieces of wood, and I should hate to see you in Court for maltreating a prisoner."

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH A DISCOVERY IS MADE

INSPECTOR HIGGINS mounted the second flight of stairs warily. Not so much because he was expecting attack as that his recent blow had left him somewhat unsteady on his feet, necessitating care in the ascent. He was fully convinced in his mind that the man upstairs, whoever he was, had long since left the premises. He was a bit cloudy in his recollections, but he had a vague suspicion that the man upstairs and the man who almost opened the door of the room in which he was hiding were one and the same. Now he came to reason things out, there had been a considerable amount of time between the sound of the footsteps overhead and the sound of the footsteps coming up the stairs. During that time it was quite possible that the man upstairs had descended the stairs without a sound and had then re-ascended them. But why should he do such a thing as that? There did not, on the face of it, appear to be any answer.

Inspector Higgins stopped short at an open window, and from marks in the dust on the sill, plainly visible in the moonlight, it was obvious that one of the men (if not both of them) had escaped down a thick drainpipe at the side of the wall. Higgins was vaguely sceptical as to the strength of this pipe, considering that the rest of the house had been condemned, but quickly ascertained that it had been reinforced by iron bands placed at convenient periods for footholds. A handy means of escape, and of recent execution, too. This house was indeed a find! He would go over it with a tooth-comb in the morning, but for the present . . .

He came to the top of the stairs and flashed his electric torch along the passage. Ah! This was the room! From its position it was obviously the one over that in which he had been hiding. It was in this room that the noise of someone walking across it had been so plainly audible in the room below.

The door was shut, and the Inspector walked towards it. He tried the handle.

"Curse it! Locked." So there was someone inside! He exerted a gentle pressure and was surprised to find the door give a little. There was the sound of a stifled gasp within the room, instantly suppressed. The inspector placed his shoulder against the panel of the door and heaved. The door gave way easily; in fact, too easily for Higgins, who almost lost his balance, and saved himself from falling precipitately into the room by a desperate clutch at the doorhandle.

"Now then, you inside! Come along out!"

There was no reply.

"I'll give you three seconds to make up your mind. Then I start shooting through the door. I've got a squad downstairs" (the two constables would have been highly flattered had they but heard this description!), "so the game's up."

Silence.

"Just as you like. One—two——"

"D—d—don't shoot, mister!"

Inspector Higgins was badly startled, for it was a girl's voice which had at last broken the silence. He opened the door quickly and entered the room, softly closing the door behind him. Placing his back to the closed door to prevent any attempt at escape he flashed his torch round the room.

Cowering in the far corner of the room was a girl of about seventeen years of age, whitefaced and shivering, her whole demeanour denoting fear—not mere fright, but stark fear. Inspector Higgins was sorry he had startled

the girl by his futile threat of shooting, for it must have been nerve-racking enough for her to be alone in this room at this ungodly hour of the morning. He had a soft spot in his heart for all children, and this girl was little more than a child.

"Now then, missy. There's nothing to be afraid of. What are you doing here?"

"N-n-nothing, sir."

"H'm. Nothing, eh?" A sudden explanation occurred to the inspector. Perhaps the kid had no home, and had come in here for a night's rest. He suggested as much.

"That's right, sir. That's right."

The prompt reply had been a little too eager to the detective's sensitive ears.

"That's two lies you've told me already, my dear. And you've only answered two questions. Dear, dear! Now then. The truth, please!" Sternly.

"I—I'm looking for my T—Tommy, sir."

"And who's Tommy?"

"My boy"—proudly. Inspector Higgins grinned approvingly in the darkness.

"And did you expect to find him in an empty house?"

The girl stared in his direction, a queer expression upon her face, and, although she could not see him, the gentle quality of his voice seemed to give her courage.

"Of course I did. And you know what's happened to him! You and your gang! Why can't you leave my boy alone?" Like an angry kitten, with blazing eyes she stormed for a moment, then once more seemed afraid. She bit her nether lip as though to prevent a further outburst.

"Me and my gang, eh? That's news indeed! Who do you take me for?"

The girl did not reply. Already she appeared to regret what she had said, and the inspector was at a loss as to how to proceed. A gradual lightening of the blackness at the window at her back reminded him that the dawn had

come, so he suggested that she might come along with him to get a bite of breakfast.

"Nothing doing."

"Eh?"

"Nothing doing. You've got my boy here somewhere, and——"

"All right, my dear. We'll make a further search, if you'll be good."

"You'll let him go, won't you?"

"I hope so. Now tell me how you came to be hiding up here."

The girl thought for a moment, then: "I s'pose I'd better tell you. I followed you in."

"Good Lord!"

"Yes. I shut the door after you. You oughtn't to have left it open, you know," naïvely.

Inspector Higgins smiled. This explains the complete lack of interest shown by the uniformed constable outside upon finding the battered hat.

"Very courageous, I'm sure. But why here?"

"My boy followed a bloke in here last night, and I ain't seen him since."

Inspector Higgins started. Last night! A man had been shot in a bus last night from such a house as this!

"H'm. And you think I'm one of the gang, eh? Why?"

"Well, you asked if there was anyone at home—I heard you."

"Gosh!" Higgins smiled as he recollected his facetious effort earlier in the night.

"You ain't a cop, are you?"

Inspector Higgins turned the beam of his electric torch so that the girl could see the outline of his features, then smiled his most disarming smile.

"Now, my dear, tell me honestly. Do I look like one?"

The girl studied his face for a moment, then, with great seriousness:

"Yes, you do."

A burst of laughter from the inspector greeted this reply. Had the girl but known it, she had shattered a long-cherished delusion of the inspector that he did not look like a policeman.

"H'm. What's it matter, anyway? Now let's find that boy of yours. He's not downstairs, I can tell you that: and he's not in here. Have you looked any further?"

"No, sir. When that other man followed you in I hid in here, and I've been here ever since, afraid to move."

"So your Master Tommy may be upstairs. We'll have a look." Inspector Higgins walked to the top of the stairs, and, leaning over the tremulous banister (at great risk of their immediate collapse) called out:

"Goldfinch!"

"Sir," came the prompt reply from down below.

"Get a cab for me, if you can. I've found a young lady here, whom I may have to take home."

"Very good, sir."

"Now then, missy—what's your name, by the way?"

"Jill."

"How very nice. Jill what?"

"Jill Crawford."

Higgins made a mental note of the name, and determined to make suitable enquiries. He ascended the stairs cheerfully, the girl at his heels. The stairs were considerably more narrow than the previous flight and indicated that they led to an attic or garret. At the top of the flight there was a door—it was locked, and there was no key.

"Do you think I'll bring the house down if I break in this door?" queried Higgins facetiously, as the girl reached his side at the top of the stairs.

"I—I hope not. Tommy's in there."

"Oh!"—quickly. "How do you know?"

"I—I don't really know, but I *feel* it."

"H'm." Higgins, the sceptic, emitted an unchivalrous grunt. "Stand back, missy." He balanced himself at the

top of the stairs, then hurled himself at the door. There was a rending crash and the door flew open.

"Anything wrong, sir?" A very anxious voice from the regions below asked the question eagerly.

"It's all right, thank you, Smart."

Inspector Higgins gazed into the room. It was, as he had anticipated, an attic. A slanting roof, with a skylight well beyond the reach, served as walls, and seated upon a piece of sacking at the junction of the floor and the roof, his face buried in his hands, was a youth.

"Tommy! Tommy!" Jill Crawford ran across the floor with outstretched arms.

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH A YOUNG LADY IS SENT HOME

INSPECTOR HIGGINS surveyed the attic with professional interest. This ramshackle house was, as he had remarked before, a great find. It needed but the discovery of a dead man on the roof to make the find complete! Higgins was in such a state of bewilderment that he would not have been surprised were such a discovery to follow. The only thing against such a possibility was the fact that the roof was sloping, and, in all probability, the guttering on which the body might conveniently rest had long since fallen into decay!

The skylight, through which the first dim light of a new day was faintly glimmering, had once been glazed, but there was no longer any glass in the framework. The attic was bare of furniture, and the sacking upon which both the boy and the girl were now seated in earnest conversation had probably at some distant date been used in the skylight in place of the broken glass.

The pair on the floor seemed completely oblivious to the inspector's presence, and Higgins, innately courteous, did not intrude upon their whisperings. His time would come later!

Eventually, when he considered that such a time had arrived, he emitted a deprecating cough. The pair started, and the girl jumped to her feet, whilst the youth slowly and painfully rose and stood shakily upon his feet at her side.

"Good morning"—with a friendly smile. "Now you must tell *me* all about it."

The youth looked up, surlily. He was still in his teens,

of no great stature, and possibly good-looking—but for his present scowl.

"A nice dirty trick you played on me—locking me in like that!"

Inspector Higgins raised his eyebrows quizzically, and the youth peered in his direction, then crept forward, staring into the other's face.

"That's right. Make sure it *was* me before . . ." began the inspector, smiling, completely off his guard. His remark was cut short by a vicious blow which the other aimed at his face. Higgins staggered backwards a step as he was knocked off his balance, then he dived for the other's feet, just as he had reached the top stair. A yell of fright, then a tremendous clatter as the youth fell down the complete flight, and lay inert at the bottom.

"You blasted fool!" Inspector Higgins ran down the stairs, whilst the girl screamed.

"You've killed him. Oh, you've killed him!"

Constable Smart, in the basement, hearing the pandemonium upstairs, decided to add his quota, and blew his police-whistle with all his might, running up the stairs and shouting encouragement to his inspector, whom he imagined to be fighting for his life. Arrived at the top of the stairs he stopped short, amazed. Inspector Higgins, upon one knee, was raising from the floor the head of a youngster, whilst near by a girl stood silently, her fists clenched, with anxious eyes upon the youth. Higgins, upon his approach, looked up.

"Ah, Smart. Some water, please."

"Yessir." Constable Smart departed upon his errand, and the inspector turned to the girl.

"Don't try any hanky-panky business, missy—you'll only come off second best, and——"

A groan from the young man stopped his warning, and the inspector set the lad's head more comfortably in the crook of his arm.

"Well?" he queried, smilingly. "How's tricks? No

bones broken, I hope." He ran a professional hand over the other's anatomy, talking cheerfully meanwhile, and was feeling the other's left arm when the lad emitted a cry of pain. "Aha! Arm damaged, eh? H'm. Sprained. A few days' rest and you'll be as sprightly as ever."

The sound of footsteps upon the stairs and Constable Goldfinch put in an appearance.

"I've got a taxi, sir."

"Good. Where's Smart gone to?"

"Getting some water, sir. The Water Board must 'a' cut off this place years ago, sir."

"Oh yes. Of course. Telephone for an ambulance, will you?" Then, indicating the injured youth, "We'll have to cart this chap to the hospital."

"I won't go!"

"Hallo! Still alive and kicking, eh! And why won't you go?"

"Don't like hospitals," the youth explained, sullenly. "I'm all right." He tried to rise to his feet, but the effort was a little too much for his injured arm. He sank back with a suppressed groan. Higgins gazed at him with some slight compassion. He well knew the horror of the average poor of hospitals. A ridiculous antipathy, really, when one considers that the hospitals give the best treatment at the cheapest rates.

"All right. Ring up Primrose 44523 and ask the Doc to get out of bed again. Don't mind his language. He's been years learning it!"

"Now then, sonny," continued the inspector, as Constable Goldfinch descended the stairs, "you owe me an apology. What was the big idea just now?"

"I thought you locked me in."

"Well, I didn't. But when were you locked in?"

"The night before last."

"Good Lord! How did that happen?"

"I followed a bloke in here to see what he was up to—

but someone must 'a' seen me, for I got a cosh at the back of the head and woke up in the room upstairs."

"Why didn't you holler?" queried Higgins, dropping into the other's vernacular.

"Holler? Holler? No one takes any notice of hollering here. I couldn't reach that winder in the roof or I might 'a' climbed out. But I'll catch the bloke one day"—darkly and with venom—"an' when I do—I'll kill him!"

"Steady, my lad. Steady. You can't kill a chap merely because he gives you—what did you call it? Oh, I know—a cosh at the back of the head. If you could, you know," he added whimsically, "I should be entitled to strangle you forthwith."

Constable Smart came running up the stairs with a jug of water in his hand, and the inspector promptly relieved him of it, and placed the jug to the boy's lips, watching him intently meanwhile. The boy sipped slowly at first, then, catching the inspector's eyes upon him, drank more deeply, until with a sigh he released the jug, three-parts empty.

"Thanks, Smart. Return the jug and tell the taxi-fellow outside that we shan't be a couple of minutes." He turned again to the youngster. "Now then, young man, perhaps you'll tell me why you are so anxious to do for that other man."

"He killed my Dad"—with simple dignity.

Inspector Higgins stared silently at the youth, gauging the depth of his sincerity, then:

"You'd better tell me all about it, sonny. I'm a 'tec. It's my job running down murderers and the like—I get paid to do it, and I have the law behind me. People who run private vendettas of their own—no matter under what provocation—eventually get it in the neck. Sometimes what they get in the neck is a rope. We police don't take sides, you know." The boy shuddered.

"I—I can't tell you, sir. My Dad died by his own hand.

He killed himself, but this other chap drove him to it—of that I'm sure. I know who it was, and one day I'll get him."

"H'm. And the day after you get him—I'll get you. It's not worth it, sonny, you can take it from me." Inspector Higgins became aware of their silent spectator—the girl—and he turned to her.

"Would you marry a murderer, my dear?"

The girl did not answer, so Higgins turned again to the youth.

"Well, sonny? What about it?"

"I—I never thought of that, sir."

"H'm. Well, it's high time you started thinking. Now then, missy, I'm going to trust you. Here's a quid note. There's a taxi downstairs. Push off home, but bring me the change to-morrow morning at Scotland Yard. Ask for Higgins—they all know me. Run along. I'll look after this young fellow for you."

The girl hesitated for a moment, undecided what to do, then, looking into the inspector's eyes and being apparently reassured by what she read there, she patted the youth maternally upon his unkempt hair, and, with a smile, was gone.

Inspector Higgins walked to the broken window of the room facing the street and peered down. He saw the girl enter the taxi, then, in spite of his assurance that he was going to trust Miss Crawford, made a pencilled note of the taxi's number as soon as he had deciphered it.

Goldfinch entered the house almost immediately and reported to Higgins.

"Bit o' luck, sir. Dr. Pape had been called to a private patient near by, so I rang up the house and he should be here any minute now."

As if to support his assertion a private car slowed down on the opposite kerb, turned a complete semicircle in the roadway, and drew up outside the house. Dr. Pape, the police surgeon, alighted, gazed with furrowed brow at the

apparently empty house, and seemed about to return to his car when he caught sight of Smart, and the pair entered the building together.

"Well, Higgins, here I am," remarked Dr. Pape cheerily, as he ascended the last flight of stairs. "The Sioux Indians call me Wamba-Wamba—which being interpreted meaneth 'The-Eye-Which-Never-Closes'—and——" He broke off as he surveyed the youth standing by the inspector, and supported by his arm. "Hallo-allo-allo! I think we've met before."

"Doctor Pape!" muttered the youth.

"Right first time." The police surgeon turned to the astonished inspector. "Well, Higgins, who's dead?"

"Nobody yet, but this boy wants to run amok with a hatchet. He's hurt his arm."

"H'm. And you've hurt your head, seemingly," responded the doctor, his professional instinct aroused.

"That's nothing. Look at this kid's arm."

. . . . . .

Tommy had been sent home, his arm bandaged, under the protection of the two constables, who had definite instructions to keep an eye upon him, and to "shadow" his movements should he disobey Dr. Pape's instructions to remain in bed for a few days.

"Now then, Doc. I refrained from further questioning of that boy because I guessed you could tell me a lot about him, and because your remarks might bear the strain of investigation, whereas his might not."

"Thank you for those kind words," replied the doctor, with mock dignity. "His name's Thomas Hamper, and we met at the inquest on his father."

"Ah." Inspector Higgins was silent for a few moments, then:

"Suicide?"

"Yes."

"H'm. Poor kid"—thinking of the injured youth. "He

says he knows the man who drove his father to it. What came out at the inquest?"

"You ought to know, Higgins. You put that new man on it."

"Oh! I remember now. Stuck his head in a gas-oven or something, didn't he?"

"More or less. He died by gas poisoning, anyhow. Unsound mind."

"I've got it now. I'll have to glance over Summers' report when I get back to the Yard. By the way, Doc. That kid says he's been locked in here since the night before last—could you tell whether he'd been without food or drink for, say, thirty hours?"

"Couldn't say, old man. Quite likely. He looked healthy enough. Don't suppose thirty or even sixty hours would make much difference to a kid of his stamina. Did he ask for a drink or anything when you found him?"

"No. But I went for some, and he drank very nearly a jugful of water."

"H'm. Difficult to tell. You should have warned me, and then I might have looked for signs, but—thirty hours! —practically impossible to tell. Where was he locked in, by the way?"

"Attic."

"Any signs?"

"I'm just going up to have another look around."

"Right. I'll come along and tender some expert advice" —facetiously.

"That'll be very helpful," responded Higgins dryly, yet with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

They mounted the top flight of stairs together, and the doctor, noting the broken door, remarked:

"Aha! Giving exhibitions of prodigious strength again, I see." He gazed round the room. "Why didn't the kid try to break down the door, I wonder?"

"Because it opens inwards. It's simple to charge down a door from the outside——"

"To you, perhaps, but for myself——"

"But to pull it open from the inside . . ." Higgins shrugged his massive shoulders expressively.

"What about the skylight? Too high, I suppose?"

"Yes. If I give you a leg up, will you see—well, what you can see?"

Inspector Higgins lifted up Doctor Pape, who again marvelled at his friend's vigour, and the police surgeon gripped the edge of the framework. There was no need to open the skylight, for the absence of any glass saved this trouble.

"Nothing here, Higgins. I can just see the houses opposite."

"It faces the street, then?"—unnecessarily.

"Yes."

"All right."

Higgins lowered the doctor, and after one more look round, they descended the stairs.

"This is where I got my clout at the back of the head."

"Who did it?"

"Constable Goldfinch, in an excess of zeal."

Dr. Pape tittered, so Higgins continued, ruefully: "Yes. I know it's damned funny, but—Good—Lord!"

"Now what?"

"I—wonder!" Inspector Higgins stepped towards the door, and carefully examined the knob on the outside of it. He cast his mind back. Yes. The last person to touch this doorhandle on the outside was the man who had followed Jill Crawford into the building, and who had waited at the bottom of the next flight of stairs for such an unconscionable time. That being so, he should have left behind some valuable fingerprints.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH THE YOUNG LADY RETURNS

"WOULD you mind waiting here a few minutes, Doc, whilst I ring up the Yard?"

"Carry on, Higgins, don't mind me," responded the doctor, his voice suggesting his martyrdom to a cause.

Ten minutes later Inspector Higgins returned, having made arrangements for a photographer to call at the building and for a guard to be set outside.

"But we'll have to wait until the guard arrives, won't we, Higgins?"

"No. I've got a uniformed cop outside."

"Lucky to find one, weren't you."

"Not exactly—he found me. The fact that I had just emerged from an apparently empty house seemed to have escaped his notice, but the fact that I had left a car outside unattended and blocking the traffic caused him to make enquiries as to my name and address. I thought you ran to a chauffeur, Doc?"

"So I do in the ordinary way, but I drive myself when I'm called out in the middle of the night, and the chap picks me up early in the morning—like he did at the garage yesterday. As a matter of fact I expect he's been to my patient near by already, but, as I didn't tell them—naturally—whither I was bound, he's probably pushed off home again. Can I give you a lift?"

"That's kind of you, Doc."

The two police officials descended the stairs to the basement.

"Lost your tile, Higgins?"

"Yes"—shortly.

Higgins closed the area door; Doctor Pape was on the bottom step with the inspector close behind him, when Higgins kicked against something amongst the litter in the area which gave a musical tinkle. He probably would not have given it a second thought had not the object thus become exposed to view. It was an old-fashioned door-key. Higgins picked it up, and noticed that, although the handle was much rusted, that portion of the key which would normally remain in the keyhole, whilst dulled, was not nearly so badly eroded. He walked to the area door again and tried the key. It did not fit. He stood for a moment deep in thought, then he gazed upwards, reflectively.

"Say, Doc. Suppose that kid locked himself in the room at the top and then threw the key out of the skylight: where d'y' think the key would be likely to fall?"

The police surgeon also gazed up the wall of the building, making a mental calculation, then:

"Right here, Higgins."

"Correct first time, Doc. Go to the top of the class."

A further delay of five minutes whilst the inspector once more mounted the steps to the top of the house, and when he returned his expression was very serious. The key fitted the lock of the broken door leading to the attic.

Together they entered the doctor's car. A heap of dust and debris had been swept together by an early morning roadman, upon the top of which rested a battered bowler hat. Dr. Pape pointed to it.

"There you are, Higgins, me boy. You'd better pick that helmet up. Some unwise diner is now probably wondering where he lost it."

Dr. Pape started his car and, by careful steering, managed to pass his near wheel over the broken headgear. He seemed childishly pleased at the accomplishment. Higgins had, however, already written off the hat as a total loss.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins returned home, partook of a hearty meal (termed, by reason of the time, "breakfast"), then

went to bed, completely tired out by two consecutive nights without sleep.

The inspector was up and about early the next morning, completely refreshed after about twenty hours' rest. His head was still slightly sore when he tried to put on his best bowler preparatory to leaving his house, and he caused no little surprise and comment when he turned up at the Yard an hour later wearing a cloth cap. He lost thereby some of his prestige as the essence of sartorial refinement!

His investigations had been carried a few steps further during his absence the previous day. Sergeant Mercier's list of "doubtful" citizens along the bus route had been carefully sifted. Most of them had unimpeachable alibis, whilst one of them, mistaken as to the reason for the enquiry, had confessed to some minor depredation during the night in question. Higgins grinned sympathetically. Some of the smaller crooks had all the bad luck! His own enquiry, however, was not helped forward, except in a negative manner, by the results of these questionings. He telephoned for Sergeant Mercier, and a few minutes later that cheery individual put in an appearance.

"This bus murder, Mercier," said Higgins, as the sergeant stood at attention before his desk. "You've got photographs of the deceased, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Taken at the mortuary. I've compared it with photos of the latest missing gentry, but there's nothing doing. Can't make out where all these missing folk get to," he finished up plaintively.

Inspector Higgins looked at him for a moment, then: "Most of 'em have left the country with other men's wives or other men's money," he said cynically. "So our bus man has not yet been reported missing, eh? H'm. Curious, that. Chap must live somewhere, and you'd 'a thought someone would 'a missed him." He opened, whilst talking, another plain envelope, which, upon examination, proved to contain a photograph, much enlarged, of a thumb-print.

Written upon the back were the words: "From outside doorknob on first floor of 79, Horton Road."

"Seen this?" queried Higgins, exhibiting to the sergeant's gaze the print.

"Yes, sir. Again nothing doing."

"I see. Thanks."

Sergeant Mercier bowed gravely and left the inspector's office. Higgins smiled amusedly as the door closed. Mercier was a bit of an oddity, but a wonderful man at his job.

Once more Higgins reached for his telephone, and this time with some trepidation, for he had instructed Constables Goldfinch and Smart to keep an eye on Thomas Hamper, but had, unfortunately, forgotten to arrange for their reliefs. Surely, he reflected, they would have the *nous* to telephone the Yard for the required help? No. No enquiry from either of them. Not yet, anyway.

"Oh. Just a moment, sir." A pause, whilst Higgins could hear much muttering at the other end of the line which he was not intended to hear. It amused him. "Why the devil didn't you tell me, you poor stiff! Here have I been telling old Higgins that they haven't rung up, whilst all the time . . . Grrh. You make me sick. Put a sock in it." The voice stopped for a moment, then, in a much louder tone, and with a decidedly more seductive manner, continued: "Hallo, sir. *So* sorry to have kept you waiting, but my colleague here has just informed me that Constable Smart rang up a few minutes ago. They watched the man Hamper go to bed, and then left together. They rang up to give word that they were resuming their duties now instead of coming straight to the Yard."

"They did, eh? Thanks. I only hope they won't be ringing up again in a few minutes."

His hope, however, was doomed to disappointment, for three minutes later Constable Goldfinch reported that, upon resuming his duties outside Thomas Hamper's

abode, he had discovered that, during the night, the man had left for an unknown destination.

Inspector Higgins swore dolefully, whilst Goldfinch was plainly apologetic. There was a knock at the inspector's door, and a messenger announced that a lady wished to see him.

"Show her in, please."

The inspector, being human, adjusted the set of his collar and tie, and Miss Jill Crawford was ushered into his presence. She walked to his desk, solemnly laid a small heap of silver and coppers thereon, said: "Thank you very much indeed," and would have left immediately, had not Inspector Higgins called her back.

"Yes?" she queried timidly.

"Er—how's your Tommy?"

"I'm just on my way to see him, sir. He got home all right?"

"Quite all right. When you see him, tell him I'd like to have a talk with him, will you?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks very much. Goodbye. The attendant will show you out."

He smiled a farewell, and picked up the receiver of his telephone.

"Hallo. Girl coming out. Jones has her in tow. See she's followed, please, and report."

Five minutes later the messenger once again knocked upon the inspector's door to report that a plain-clothes man had taken up the girl's trail.

"There's someone else wishes to speak with you, sir," he stated, placing a card before the inspector.

HENRY J. COLLETT,
Inspector.
Gas & Lighting Company,
East District.

"What's he want?"

"Dunno, sir. He saw Chief Dryan, who referred him to you."

"All right. Show him up."

A small, dapper, middle-aged man was conducted into the inspector's room by the messenger, who, after stating his name, immediately retired.

"Take a seat, please, Mr. Collett, and then let me know in what way I can be of assistance to you." Higgins waved to a chair. "I'm Higgins—Detective-Inspector."

"I—er—don't know whether I've done rightly or wrongly in coming to you, Inspector——" began the man nervously.

"Set your mind at rest, sir. You can't have done wrongly, you know."

The man smiled weakly. "I'm told that you were the officer in charge of the inquest." Higgins gazed blankly at the man, but made no comment. The other continued: "We get blamed for all sorts of things, Inspector, but in this case I think we are justified in saying that we have been completely exonerated." The inspector's frown of perplexity deepened, and in his mind he was calling his Chief Inspector many harsh names in that he had foisted this visitor upon him. Dryan's idea of a joke, he reflected! Mr. Collett droned on in his toneless voice. "We have tested the meter and, although I am aware of the time-worn joke of the man who, in lieu of paying the fees at his marriage, offered to show the officiating parson how to alter his gas-meter so that it would not register, this is not only an improbability, but, with our meters, an impossibility. As I have stated, we have tested the meter, and it is quite in order."

"What on earth *are* you talking about?" queried Higgins, in an exasperated tone of voice.

"A miscarriage of justice, sir," said the man pompously. "Justice to the company which I have the honour to represent."

"Oh lor'!" Inspector Higgins groaned inwardly, dou-

bling his mental imprecations against Chief Inspector Dryan.

"Here, sir, we have a man whom your police-surgeon publicly stated had died by means of gas-poisoning, whereas the man could—not—possibly—have—done—so." A marked emphasis upon each word. "A penny-in-the-slot meter, sir, and it had not been tampered with."

"My dear Mr. Collett," said Higgins wearily, "what inquest are you talking about?"

"That on the body of Henry Hamper——"

"What?" shouted the inspector, roused out of his apathy at last, but the other continued his sentence, unhurriedly:

"——held a short while back."

"Well?"

"The meter was cleared the day before yesterday."

"Go on, man. Go on."

"And it yielded but one penny!"

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR SHOWS HIS PACES

INSPECTOR HIGGINS was staggered. In fact, the word but vaguely states his perturbation. He was well aware that it was Dr. Pape who had publicly stated that Henry Hamper had died as a result of gas-poisoning. Had it been any other doctor but Dr. Pape, Higgins might have thought it was a case of mistaken diagnosis, but his faith in this police-surgeon was unbounded. Dr. Pape was not the man to jump to a conclusion. If he stated that the man had died of gas-poisoning, then without a shadow of a doubt the man had so died, yet—ah!

"And is there not sufficient coal-gas to kill a man in one pennyworth?"

"It is just about possible, sir, but highly improbable. The meter was cleared before the man took up his tenancy —it gets dark early at this time of year—so you must assume that the man never lit his gas for the whole three weeks of his occupation."

"H'm. Well, Mr. Collett, I'm much obliged to you for bringing this matter to our notice. I need hardly assure you that it will have our most earnest attention and that we shall do our utmost to—er—remove any possible—er —slur upon your company, which, if you will allow me to say so, supplies one of the—er—essentials of—er——"

He closed the door after the bowing gas official, and wiped his brow at the mental strain of his parting effusion. Then he rang a bell at his desk.

"Send Constable Summers to me at once, and ask Sergeant Mercier to let me have Summers' report of the Hamper inquest held a few days ago."

He was re-reading the report of the inquest when Constable Summers answered his summons, and he waved the man to a chair without looking up from his perusal of the document.

Having reached the end of the report, Inspector Higgins turned once more to the beginning and started again. This time he made sundry remarks in the margin of the report, and underlined certain passages. At last he looked up, and glanced questioningly at the waiting constable, who was seated on the very edge of the chair, and looked and felt most uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"Now then, Summers. *Re* the Hamper inquest. I've read your report and wish to ask you a few questions thereon."

"Oh yes, sir." Now that he knew the reason for his summons the constable felt on firmer ground, and some of his uneasiness vanished.

"To begin with. You state here"—Higgins tappped the document impressively with the pencil with which he had made the annotations—"that when you entered the room it was full of gas."

"Yessir."

"You're positive of this, I suppose?"

"Of course, sir. Naturally, I took no chances. I rushed into the room with a handkerchief over my nose and mouth—turned off the gas—flung open the window—rushed out again—then closed the door after me. We waited five minutes to let the air clear."

"Very sensible precautions, Constable."

"They were Dr. Pape's suggestions, sir," replied the constable, who was sufficiently honest to refuse unearned bouquets.

"I see." Higgins was thoughtfully silent for a moment, then: "Yet for all you know, considering that from the time you first entered the room till the time you shut the door you had your handkerchief over your nose and

mouth, there might not have been a particle of gas in the room."

Constable Summers stared at the inspector uncomprehendingly for a few moments whilst the idea slowly percolated through his brain, then, with the deepest reluctance, he admitted the possibility.

Inspector Higgins reached for the telephone and asked to be connected with Dr. Pape. There was a few moments' delay, then he heard the police-surgeon's voice at the other end of the line.

"Say, Doc, you remember going to that man Hamper's room—the gas-man, you know—with Summers of the Yard?" (The constable, hearing himself so described for the first time, swelled his chest and sat up more firmly in his chair.) "Yes, that's the fellow. Well. What did you do when he first entered the room to open the window?" The answer came back over the wire with the utmost promptitude. "Why! Held me breath, you fool! Can't take chances at my age. What's up?"

"You didn't notice a smell of gas, did you?"—unfortunately expressed.

"Didn't try. Was there a smell of gas?"—heavily sarcastic. Inspector Higgins rang off without reply, and turned once more to the constable.

"The door was locked all right. Did you examine the key?"

"No, sir. But I had to push it into the room before I could insert the duplicate key which the woman fetched for me."

"H'm. Well, Summers; you and I are going into the whole case again. I don't want you to take any active part, I merely want you to see how *I* undertake an investigation. To study—er—*my* methods——" He broke off, seized with a sudden cough as he tried to cover up his rising colour, for he had come perilously near to blowing his own trumpet, and felt an awful fool as he realised the import

of his words; whereas his suggestion was kindly meant—for Summers was a newcomer, and should learn a great deal which would be of use to him in his profession afterwards, were he to be present at an investigation conducted by the inspector with all his vast experience.

"We'll push off at once, Summers. Get your clobber and meet me at the gates in five minutes."

. . . . . .

"So this is the place, eh?"

Inspector Higgins and Constable Summers were standing on the kerb outside the brick archway leading to the house—the cynosure of many pairs of eyes. The only impression upon the inspector's mind was the fact that he was most decidedly *not* impressed! The pair passed through the entrance and slowly mounted the stone steps leading to the first floor, being halted by the door with Mrs. Hick's name and occupation scrawled thereon. The bell was more promptly answered than on the last occasion, and the redoubtable Mrs. Hick opened the door.

"Hullo! You agen!" was her greeting to the constable, but, finding the inspector's quiet eyes upon her, she shuffled uneasily and bade them enter.

"I want to see the room of the late Henry Hamper, please."

"Very good, sir. I ain't touched it, but 'is son's bin and looked the place over. You told me not to re-let it, and I ain't." The last remark was addressed to Summers, and he had a feeling of conscious virtue in having given such instructions.

Inspector Higgins entered the room and glanced around. "Did the son take anything away?"

"Nuthin' worth takin'—'cept the key. 'E told me 'e might want ter use the place, an' as 'is ole man 'ad paid up the rent—I couldn't 'elp meself."

"You had another key apparently—the one you let us in with just now."

"Yessir. 'E took the one out o' the door, and I took the one on the floor—the one this gent 'ere pushed out o' the key'ole."

"So this is the key by which the late Hamper locked himself in the room?"

"That's it, sir."

"H'm." Inspector Higgins withdrew the key from the lock and examined it carefully. It was an old-fashioned key of the peg type, and the very tip of the key was scratched, and the scratches were new. Higgins nodded grimly and pursed his lips. He then inserted the key once more in the lock, but this time from the inside of the room, and closed the door, remaining outside the door. The end of the key protruded a fraction of an inch, and the scratches were plainly visible. From his pocket the inspector produced a formidable pocket-knife, with two or three blades and many gadgets. He fiddled with this for a moment, then exhibited it to the wondering gaze of Constable Summers. One of its attachments was a fairly serviceable-looking pair of pliers.

"It may or may not be strong enough," remarked Higgins, as he gripped with the jaws the protruding end of the key. It was! Three seconds later the door was locked —from the inside.

"Voilà!" Higgins spread his hands with the air of a conjurer who has successfully completed a complicated trick. "And it was like this when you arrived on the scene, I suppose?"

The constable nodded dumbly.

To open the door with the pliers from the outside was, however, not quite so simple, for some reason or other: probably something to do with the balance of the lock. Higgins cursed himself for giving a practical demonstration of his idea instead of merely explaining it. Through this tom-foolery they couldn't open the door. The trouble was eventually solved by Mrs. Hick, who fetched a very

stout pair of pinchers from the regions below, and Higgins was able once more to open the door. He removed the key and placed it in his pocket.

"Where is his meter for the gas?"

"In the passage outside."

Inspector Higgins went and examined the meter, but there were no signs of any tampering.

"Nuthin' wrong with that, guv'nor. Those things are unintamperable with," volunteered the landlady.

Higgins blinked! That was a wonderful word of Mrs. Hick's! Unintamperable. Its meaning was obvious, however.

"How d'you know?" he queried artlessly.

"'Cos—hem." The landlady swallowed—and relapsed into silence.

"You haven't cleaned up his room, I suppose?"

"No, sir. My terms is lodgin's—not attendance," replied Mrs. Hick promptly—glad the subject had been changed.

"This ventilator, Summers. Was that covered with paper—like you said the windows were?"

"No, sir. He'd bunged up all the window cracks, sir. I expect quite a lot of gas escaped through the ventilator, sir."

"And did he—er—bung up the cracks under the door?"

"N—no, sir. I don't think he did."

"No. I don't suppose he did—that w'd 've been awkward," muttered the inspector, more to himself than to the others—reflectively caressing his chin with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

"How about Mr. Hamper's hat and gloves? They were left here I understand. Didn't his son think they were worth taking?"

"'E give 'em to me, sir," said Mrs Hick. "They were no good to 'im."

"Why?"

"Too big"—laconically.

"Too big?" repeated the inspector, unbelievingly. The landlady bridled.

"D'ye think I pinched 'em?" she shouted. "I'll go an' fetch 'em if you like."

"If you would be so kind." The landlady marched off in high dudgeon, and the inspector smiled. He strongly suspected that she *had* pinched 'em!

"Er—excuse me, sir, but—er—why do you want to see them?" ventured the constable diffidently, most anxious to learn.

"Because she said they were too big."

"But—er——"

"You've seen the son, I take it?"

"Of course, sir."

"And"—Inspector Higgins pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket—"this is your description of the father, Henry Hamper. 'Height five foot one: chest twenty-nine: etcetera, etcetera. Small, almost puny'—and the hat and gloves are too big for the son."

"Then she has stolen them?"

"I very much fear so."

Mrs. Hick came panting up the steps, holding a hat in one hand and the pair of gloves in the other. She thrust them ungraciously at the inspector.

"'Ere y'are."

"You're prepared to swear they belonged to the deceased?"

"I'll take me Bible oath on it."

"Are these the ones, Summers?"

"Yes, sir. I think so. Uncommonly like 'em if they're not."

"Thanks."

Inspector Higgins surveyed the lining of the hat and gloves, then, to the mild horror of the constable, he placed the hat on his head. It slipped over his ears.

The landlady tittered. "There y'are. I told yer so. Too big for you."

"Yes," said Higgins mildly. "So it is!" He looked at the constable, then: "I'll keep these, Mrs. Hick."

"You won't!"

Inspector Higgins did not vouchsafe any reply.

. . . . . .

"Now then, madam. I understand that Hamper on two occasions came home drunk, and that on the second occasion he was helped home by a constable and another man. What was the other man like?"

"Big feller. Bigger'n you"—maliciously.

"It was a Sunday night, I understand. Tell me exactly what happened."

"'E was brought 'ome 'ere in a keb, and the two on 'em carried 'im upstairs. They put 'im on the bed an' one of 'em lit the gas—"

"Ah!" An involuntary interruption from the inspector.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH HE MEETS AN OLD FRIEND

"SO the policeman and the large man stayed about twenty minutes. And I'm told you never saw Hamper alive after that."

"That's right, sir. The next time I saw pore 'Amper was on the Chewsday, when this gent 'ere and the doctor come. 'E was a goner then."

Inspector Higgins thought carefully for a moment, then his interrogation took a different turn.

"How long have you been letting lodgings here?"

"Six years. I used to keep an 'ouse in Notting Dale."

"Then you don't know a place called Bulstroade's Buildings?"

"No, sir. Never 'eard of it."

"Thanks. We'll be off now." Inspector Higgins pulled the door-key from his pocket, and, after removing the hat and gloves from the room, locked the door and replaced the key in his pocket. Mrs. Hick watched their departure (with both the hat and gloves) with mute misgivings.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins had shut himself in his room at Scotland Yard, and had told the messenger that he did not want to be interrupted unless the matter was urgent.

He wanted to think. This mystery of the death of Henry Hamper.

He wondered whether the verdict of "Suicide whilst of unsound mind" might not have been nearer the truth had it been expressed as "Murder by some person or persons unknown."

The murder on the bus and the death of Henry Hamper seemed to be intertwined. Young Hamper knew something, but he had given the police the slip, and in any case they had nothing upon which to apply for a warrant. They could merely ask him when found to go to a station, and, if he did not choose to do so, they had no means of forcing him. If he assented to go, then they would have to warn him of the possible consequences should he care to make a statement. These new regulations were the very devil!

Higgins had already sent an all-stations call for a young man with his left arm in a sling to be traced. That was about all he *could* do.

The inspector began to build a theory on the Hamper case as far as it had gone. He had proved that the door of Hamper's room could be locked from the outside whilst the key remained inside.

Then this mysterious policeman and his pal—the big man. Higgins had ascertained that no officer had reported taking home a drunken man on the Sunday night in question. For one thing, such a proceeding would be without his province. Had he been off duty a constable might stretch a point and help home a friend in a state of intoxication, but otherwise . . . Unless, of course, the man had been taken to a police station and his big friend had bailed him out. Then where did the policeman come in? Had he been offered suitable compensation to give a hand?

Then that last letter of Henry Hamper. It was a Tuesday morning when the Dead-Letter Office had sent it on to Higgins by hand.

Tuesday morning! And Hamper had been brought home dead-drunk on Sunday night. He must go round and interview the Post Office people about the times of posting. Had either the policeman or the big man posted the letter for him? If so, surely they would have noticed that the envelope was not even addressed!

And Henry Hamper had died by coal-gas poisoning.

But not at Birkenhead Mansions. That was a sheer impossibility! And Mrs. Hick had not known that the old name for these Mansions was Bulstroade's Buildings. Was it likely, therefore, that Henry Hamper, a tenant of but three weeks, should have known the old name? Yet he had given this as his address in his letter to the police. Of course, it was probable that Hamper had known the building in the old days—that might be the explanation.

This letter now. There was neither pen nor ink in that fatal room, and from the list of the contents of his clothing there was no mention of a fountain pen. Yet the letter was written in ink! When and where was it written? And, more important of all, had Hamper written it? His son had been unable to state whether or not it was his father's handwriting.

And the hat and gloves. Too large for the diminutive Hamper. What about those? Inspector Higgins surveyed the objects in question which were placed upon his desk in front of him.

He picked up the hat and felt beneath the band inside. He withdrew a sheet of newspaper which had been wrapped inside to reduce its size. Higgins had a momentary shock as he realised that the hat had been too big for its wearer, but remembered that he had tried it on before he knew that it had been packed inside. He opened the sheet of paper. It was the front page of a popular financial journal. Scarcely the type of paper which would attract the deceased Hamper!

And if the hat and gloves did not belong to Hamper, to whom did they belong? And why were they found in that room at Bulstroade's Buildings? The most likely man to Higgins's way of thinking was the large man who had helped Hamper home on the Sunday night.

Mrs. Hick had stated that they had been with Hamper about twenty minutes. Had she noticed whether the large man had been hatless when he left? The inspector made a pencilled reminder to find out.

There was a knock at his door, and Higgins frowned at the interruption.

"Who is it?"

"Me, sir—er—Constable Jones, sir," the man amended quickly.

"All right. Come in," replied the inspector, ungraciously. "What d'y' want?"

"I've been trailing that girl, sir. She's in a dreadful state. Looking for someone, I imagine, sir. I've just been relieved, and I was told to report to you immediately."

"Thanks." Higgins picked up the papers he had been perusing, and the man, accepting this as an intimation of dismissal, retired from the room.

So Jill Crawford did not know that young Hamper had bolted, or where he had gone!

Inspector Higgins made a decision. He jumped up from his seat and, taking his hat and overcoat from a peg on the wall, he locked his room and left the Yard.

A quarter of an hour later he was ensconced with Mr. Rayner of the Dead-Letter Office.

The interview was short, but the information gained was very much to the point. The plain envelope had been collected from the pillar-box opposite Birkenhead Mansions at 7 o'clock on the Monday morning. It must therefore have been placed in the box since the previous collection at eleven o'clock on the Sunday evening. Upon the letters being sorted, the plain envelope had been placed on one side ("Slung out" was Mr. Rayner's pithy expression) in the Query box. This box was gone through about noon on the Monday, and, as the Post Office sorters take a great deal of trouble with letters insufficiently addressed, and as there seemed to be an epidemic of such letters that morning, it was not until late in the evening that the plain envelope had been weeded out and sent to the Dead-Letter Department. Here it had to take its turn, and was not opened till the following morning. Immediately, however, its contents were disclosed, instead of

opening the enclosure as the Department had every right to do, Mr. Rayner had sent a special messenger to Scotland Yard with the enclosure.

"Which was very kind of you, sir," said the inspector, and rising from his chair, he bade Mr. Rayner "Good day."

Two things now stood out about that letter. The first: Henry Hamper was so drunk on Sunday evening that he had to be brought home. Yet, without pen or ink, he had written the letter and posted it before seven the following morning. (The inspector, again from his own "vast experience," had to admit that the "morning after" was not conducive to letter-writing; neither did one feel inclined to get up during the night in order to post a letter. As a matter of fact, if one actually woke before seven it was in the nature of a miracle. Why, on one occasion, after a more than usually hectic committee meeting when a forthcoming concert in aid of the Police Orphanage was arranged, he well remembered that . . . He smiled reminiscently. Gosh! He *was* bad. . . . Higgins pulled him self together with a jerk!)

The other thing which stood out in connection with the letter was that, unless it had been posted for Henry Hamper by one of his helpers on the Sunday night, it had been posted by some person who, to add verisimilitude to the suggestion that Hamper had posted it himself, had gone to the trouble of posting it in the letter-box which Hamper would most assuredly have used. A bit involved perhaps, but it expressed the inspector's reasoning.

. . . . . .

Supposing . . . Henry Hamper had died by gas-poisoning somewhere else, not necessarily murder, and supposing . . . two of his friends, one a large man and the other in policeman's uniform, but not necessarily a member of the Police Force (Higgins was always loyal even in his thoughts), took the dead Hamper by cab to his room, and, having lit the gas, arranged the room to

look as if suicide were contemplated, turned out the gas, then turned it on without lighting it . . . and supposing they had then discovered that they had left behind Hamper's hat, and the large man had been compelled to leave his own in the room . . . Supposing all this—why send the letter?

What purpose did the letter serve? It merely helped to confirm the suicide; which, being so, tended to prove that it was *not* suicide. And if it wasn't suicide then it was murder.

What did they gain by placing the letter in a plain envelope before posting it? Delay—that was what! And why delay? Necessary for a getaway. And why post the letter at all?

Sending the letter was a bad mistake! They should have taken their chance that Hamper was not discovered.

. . . . . .

"Thomas Hamper must be found. See to it!" Inspector Higgins issued these instructions well knowing that they were more easily said than done. To begin with, there were no photographs of the young man available. The interest taken by the Press in the inquest on his father was surprisingly negative. The Yard's file of newspaper cuttings on the case contained but two references. One, a dozen lines in the local paper, and the other three lines under the heading "News from Near and Far," giving the verdict. The reason was not far to seek, for suicide by means of gas was becoming (to the newspaper world) prosaic copy. The bus murder was more in their line. Thus no photographs of young Hamper had been taken by enterprising reporters—and a visit to his lodgings failed to produce any, for what young man nowadays keeps his own photograph?

Still, young Thomas Hamper knew something. He stated, though whether he had spoken the truth Inspector Higgins was not too sure, that he had followed a "bloke" into that condemned house at Horton. He had further

stated that that "bloke" was responsible for the death of his father. The man must be an old associate of Henry Hamper. And Henry Hamper had been a crook. It was reasonably certain therefore that the man (if any) whom young Hamper had followed had also been a crook.

Were there any known crooks of exceptional size? Dozens. "Beefy" Edwards—"Lofty" Baynard—"Tiny" Campbell . . . "Any amount of 'em," reflected Higgins.

A gruesome photograph had been circulated to the police stations all over the country—the body of the unknown man found shot on top of the bus. Name and address required.

But one uninspiring reply was received, yet the inspector felt obliged to investigate. The superintendent of a county station reported that a village constable, making his weekly call at the station, had seemed to recognise the photograph.

Higgins was not very hopeful. The constable, when interviewed, seemed even more uncertain than he had been when he drew his superintendent's attention to the matter. "The photograph looked very like one of the gents up at the big house"—that was all.

The inspector was conducted by the constable to the lodge gates of the big house, and there, to the man's intense relief (for he had felt woefully uncomfortable in the presence of such a high official), he dismissed his guide.

He passed through the lodge gates and walked up the gravelled path. The house itself was set well back from the road, and was in a fine state of repair. Obviously wealthy owners. The gardens were well tended, and behind the house could be seen many rows of greenhouses. The inspector walked up the five steps leading to the front door, then rang the bell.

There was a sound of shuffling footsteps, then the door was opened, and framed in the doorway was a small, wizened, middle-aged man in formal evening dress, a size

too large for him. He stared at the inspector for a moment, then:

"Lumme. 'Iggins!"

The inspector peered closely at the man, who looked as if he would willingly have bitten off his tongue for his needless ejaculation. A moment later and the recognition was mutual. Higgins smiled. "Blessed if it isn't Soapy! Well, I never did! Fancy meeting you here!" Inspector Higgins advanced with outstretched hand, whilst the man backed furtively away.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH HE MEETS ANOTHER OLD FRIEND

THE man glanced stealthily back into the gloom of the spacious hall, his manner indicative of overwhelming fear. He licked his lips, then turned to the inspector.

"Clear aht ov 'ere, Mr. 'Iggins! Clear aht! You've allers played the w'ite man ter me—you've never tried ter fasten on ter me cribs I never cracked. Clear aht, sir! Clear aht!"

"I thought you knew me better than that, Soapy!" the inspector smilingly remarked.

"Lumme, Mr. 'Iggins. Don't sye I never warned yer—don't sye I done yer dirt!"

Inspector Higgins frowned uneasily. The man's fear was so genuine, his manner so agitated, that the inspector had a creepy feeling down his spine. He shuddered involuntarily, then pulled himself together.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Raymond, Soapy."

"Don't do it, Mr. 'Iggins! Don't do it!" the man urged. "I—"

"Show the inspector into the library, Soapy."

The voice was cold and toneless, yet with an undercurrent of evil. Soapy shivered, then placed a grubby forefinger in his mouth, to stay the chattering of his teeth.

"Y—y—yessir."

"Then go to your room. I'll attend to you later. You talk too much."

Inspector Higgins followed the thoroughly frightened Soapy down the passage and into the library. It was empty, but a bright fire was burning at the other end of the room, and instinctively the inspector made for its comforting warmth. Soapy, having conducted Inspector Hig-

gins into the room, retired without another word. The cold, calculating voice seemed to have dried up his powers of speech.

Higgins stared round the room. The four walls were lined with books, intersected with occasional etchings. He felt uncomfortable, not only on Soapy's behalf, but for his own. There was something mysterious in the very atmosphere of this place.

He warmed his hands in front of the fire, awaiting the owner of the voice—its quiet menace still found an echo in his brain. Five minutes passed and nothing happened. Inspector Higgins began to fret at the delay. The discourtesy of it was probably intentional—the thought curbed his impatience. He seated himself in an easy chair and pulled out his pipe and tobacco. If the owner of this place chose to ignore his visit, then he would have to put up with any breach of etiquette on the inspector's part. Higgins had filled his pipe, and was just on the point of lighting it, when a soft, gentle and cultured voice spoke immediately behind him.

"That is right, Inspector. Make yourself at home."

Higgins swung round in his chair. Standing immediately behind him, exuding goodwill with a benign smile and rubbing his hands together, was the biggest man the inspector had ever seen.

Higgins was startled, not so much at the man's presence, but that he had not heard the man enter the room. That such a huge man could move so quietly seemed uncanny. Higgins jumped to his feet.

"Good afternoon. I called to see Mr. Raymond. My card, apparently, is not needed."

"No, Inspector. We—er—have heard of you, although, speaking for myself, I have never to my knowledge seen you before." The big fellow stared down at Higgins from his superior height. "Mr. Raymond is no longer with us."

"Dead?"

"I'm afraid I express myself rather badly. I meant to convey that Mr. Raymond—er—no longer lives here."

"I thought I heard him speak in the hall just now."

"That? No. That was certainly *not* Mr. Raymond. Oh, dear me, no." He laughed—an unpleasant sound. "That was Mr.—but his name does not matter. He is upstairs now—er attending to Mr. Soapy, our estimable butler. You mustn't place too much reliance on our Mr. Soapy's chatter, you know. He doesn't always tell the truth. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, Inspector, our Mr. Soapy is not—er—unfamiliar with the inside of a gaol."

"I know that well enough. I've put him in clink twice myself."

"Dear me! Fancy that now!"

A silence, during which the inspector had a vaguely uneasy feeling that there was someone other than the large man and himself in the room. Mechanically he lit his pipe, and, blowing the first mouthful of smoke upwards, he nonchalantly subjected the ceiling to a close scrutiny. Nothing doing. He stooped over the fireplace and tapped the bowl of his pipe on one of the bars. No one on the left hand side of the room. He turned round quickly, ostensibly to adjust the cushion on his easy chair—a flutter of a curtain hanging near the door caught his eye—then he reseated himself comfortably.

"Yes," he answered the other's unspoken query. "That's why I called—to warn you of Soapy; but as you are already aware of his past delinquencies, well—" He shrugged his shoulders, stood up, and walked swiftly across the room towards the curtains.

"Stop!"

A masked man stepped into the room, a revolver in his right hand, his left clutching the curtain. "Stick 'em up!"

Inspector Higgins slowly obeyed, but was surprised to see, out of the corner of his eye, that the big fellow was also reaching upwards. Then he guessed at the truth. The

big man's compliance with the curt order was merely a blind. Of course, the pair were in cahoots, but the big man's play-acting cut no ice. He was wrong, however, for:

"That's right, Sanderson. I meant the two of you. Stick 'em up an' keep 'em up."

There was something familiar about the masked figure, and Higgins, whilst glancing warily about him for some means of ending this intolerable position, was also trying to place the newcomer. Suddenly he found the answer, the voice had betrayed its owner. The man was young Thomas Hamper, for whom the whole Police Force was searching. So he *is* mixed up with these people, he reflected.

He glanced at the youngster's left arm, and could just see the white bandage at the wrist. Should he keep the knowledge to himself, or should he let the pair see that in spite of the mask he had identified the intruder? In any case he was at a bad disadvantage. He was at the wrong end of the gun.

There was a coloured rope attached to the thick curtains, and this the young man disengaged awkwardly with his injured arm.

"Here you," he ordered, nodding at Higgins, "take this." The inspector perforce had to obey. "Now you," indicating the other, "take a walk to that chair and sit down."

There was a murderous gleam in Sanderson's eyes as he retreated. He too was under the impression that the other two were acting in conjunction, and could not understand these new police methods.

"Now tie him up."

Inspector Higgins did as he was bidden, cheerfully, albeit wonderingly. What young Hamper thought he was up to was not exactly clear, but, with the big man securely trussed, Higgins did not feel that young Hamper was an insuperable proposition. With infinite care he tied the man's arms to the back of the chair, then he roped the man's legs securely. Sanderson's boots made him shudder.

Pointed, patent-toed, and cloth-topped, they were hideous in their vulgarity.

He stood up. Hamper's eyes had a quizzical look from the slit in his mask. One of them slowly closed! "Better gag him whilst you're about it." Higgins complied. He dimly wondered why the large man hadn't yelled for aid before this, but guessed when he looked into his eyes. The man was mortally afraid.

"Now lock the door."

"Certainly." Inspector Higgins sauntered towards the door. This was too good to be true! All he would have to do to end this bizarre state of affairs was, when he reached the door, to open it quickly and walk out. True, there might be other trouble awaiting him at the other side of the door, but—sufficient unto the day . . . He measured his chances as he walked along. The door opened inwards—that was a bit of a nuisance! The key was not on the inside—a good excuse to open the door. Of course, the young fool might not fire the revolver if he did make a bolt for it, but young men with grievances were apt to do the most stupid things. Ah. Here we are. Now for it! He looked round. Hamper's eyes were upon him, and the revolver was pointed in his direction. Inspector Higgins clutched the doorhandle, summoned up his courage—and pulled. The door did not budge—it was locked already!

The inspector's face was blank in its astonishment.

"What's up, sir?" Hamper's voice betrayed apprehension. The "sir" amused Higgins, inasmuch as it revealed that the boy's truculence was assumed.

"Locked!"

"Then we're in for trouble—big trouble." It was not so much the words as the way they were spoken which impressed the inspector.

"Then it's up to us to get out of it—avoid it," he remarked cheerfully. "Gimme your gun. I'm probably more used to one than you are."

" 'T'ain't no use, sir. 'T'ain't loaded."

"Well! You've gotta nerve, I must say!" commented Higgins admiringly.

Round his mask the lad's face was diffused with colour at the compliment, and the schoolboy in him (not so very distant in point of years) rose to the surface, and he pointed to the discomfited Sanderson.

"That's more than he has, sir."

It was very true. The man's face was pale, almost haggard, and beads of sweat stood out upon his forehead. He was afraid.

"If the door's locked on the outside, we'd better barricade it upon the inside. We can't escape that way—that's fairly obvious." Higgins looked round the room for a suitable fortification, and his eyes fell upon the huge Sanderson. In spite of their potential danger, he smiled happily as a thought struck him. "Here, Tommy. Gimme a hand." Young Hamper, his naturally quick wits sharpened by his street trading, immediately saw the possibility. Together the strangely assorted pair dragged the mutely protesting Sanderson to the door, and planted him firmly in his chair against the panel. Nearly two hundredweight of solid humanity—an effective barrier!

"Now then, Tommy. How did you get in?"

The boy leaned over and whispered: "Soapy let me in the back door. He thinks I've gone."

"H'm. That's awkward."

There was a knock at the door, and again the inspector heard that metallic voice.

"Well, Sanderson. Is the dear inspector—er—*non compos*—I mean *hors de combat?*" A pause. "So, my dear Sanderson, you have failed, eh?" A fierce menace in the words. The bound man's face turned a sickly grey, and the inspector felt a moment of compassion. Then whispered instructions outside the door, and the sounds of running feet. Higgins tried a bluff.

"Hi! You! There's a posse of police round the house!"

A mirthful laugh. "Yes. I saw *him* go."

"So he got away all right, eh? Thanks very much. He should be back by now—with about thirty others." Higgins listened intently in an effort to ascertain whether or not his shot had gone home, then: "They are merely awaiting my signal."

"Then why not signal, my dear Inspector?"

So that was that!

A second later a shot rang out. Simultaneously a round hole, splinted at the edges, appeared in the upper panel of the door, and a bullet whistled past the inspector and buried itself in the opposite wall. The hole in the panel was about two inches above Sanderson's head, and with protruding eyes the wretched man endeavoured to shrink himself into the chair.

Inspector Higgins crept to the window and peered out. It was dusk, and would probably be dark in less than an hour. Tommy and he must hold the fort until a merciful darkness had fallen upon the house, then try to escape by way of the window. Probably the sinister "voice" would have the same inspiration. In fact it was pretty certain that he would protect the window.

What on earth did he expect to gain even though he killed or captured the inspector? As soon as he was reported missing enquiries must be made at this house. Did the man expect to be able to bluff the police when enquiries were made? What would happen? Dryan, or some other officer, would make enquiries as to where Higgins had last been seen. The superintendent of the county station would refer him to the village constable, who in turn would lead him to the lodge gates. And then what? Would Dryan in his turn be killed or kidnapped? It was too foolish. The thing couldn't go on forever. There must be some reason. They had referred to Higgins as "Inspector" before he had presented his card—in fact he had not presented a card at all. Therefore they knew him. Soapy had known him, of course, so there was

no earthly reason why the others should not have done so. "But why me?" asked Higgins of himself. Without any undue modesty the inspector knew that he was believed to be one of the most astute officers at the Yard. He had called here to try and trace the man who had been killed on top of the bus, but then, he might just as easily have sent a subordinate. Or were they cognisant of his enquiries into the death of Henry Hamper? They must have considered this matter closed as soon as the inquest was over. Were his enquiries in that direction unwelcome? The two cases were somehow connected. Was Sanderson the owner of the hat and gloves left in Hamper's room?

Was the "voice" the uniformed policeman who had helped Hamper to his room on that Sunday night? That must be the answer. Barring Constable Summers, no other official at the Yard was cognisant of the subsequent enquiries. Yes. If he were to die the enquiries would in all probability be dropped, not so much because the case was closed as because it was in the nature of a personal matter to Higgins himself. He had been responsible for placing Summers on the case in the first place, and the gas official had come to him. Would the gas official be satisfied if the case were dropped? No, he most certainly would not. So the case would go on. . . .

Another shot disturbed his thoughts. From the window this time. Gosh! A regular siege! Inspector Higgins beckoned young Hamper towards him with a crooked forefinger, and his other forefinger on his lips, enjoining silence. The boy crept across the carpeted floor.

"No one knows you're here, sonny. When you get out, report to Chief Inspector Dryan, of Scotland Yard, and tell him all you know. If they get me they won't look for you, so you stand the better chance. Get me?" The boy nodded comprehendingly. "Now take this revolver. You bluffed me, you rascal, so you may be able to bluff him." Then he added to himself, "But I doubt it!"

Inspector Higgins gazed round the room in the gather-

ing darkness. "We must have more effective weapons, though. Ah, the fire-irons. Those two pokers look pretty useful. We'd better rake out what's left of the fire. It gives a little too much light. Come along."

The two pokers were very substantial, and—so was the chimney. The inspector gazed upwards speculatively, then, turning, beamed on his co-prisoner.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH TWO MEN GET VERY DIRTY

"THIS, my boy, is a bit of all right."

The chimney was old-fashioned, and a worthy monument of past ages. An inglenook of another generation. Wide at the base, but tapering upwards. What, however, was more to the point was a series of iron staples. rusted and possibly insecure, very black and sooty, yet leading upwards. What a tale these pieces of iron might tell of escapes in the past; and the inspector sincerely hoped that they might add to their repertoire in the near future. At any rate, it was worth trying. He stepped within the chimney, and, heedless of the soot, grasped the first staple. Gosh! It was damned hot!

He pulled off his overcoat, then decided to have a complete look round before trusting himself to the chimney. By that time it should have cooled off somewhat. He walked to the window and peeped cautiously out. He was surprised to find himself on the first floor, until he remembered the five steps leading up to the front door. The ground floor must be in the nature of a semi-basement. The library was sufficiently far above the ground to be protected from a sudden rush from the outside. Suddenly Inspector Higgins became conscious of stealthy footsteps on the gravelled path below, and two men (one of whom was an unwilling Soapy) carrying a ladder between them. Gosh! What a bit of luck he had decided on this last look round. How to repel the attack, with the others armed? And how many were there? And was Soapy's assistant with the ladder the owner of that obnoxious voice?

In one of the panes of the window was a small round hole, marking the passage of the last revolver-shot, and this served as an effective warning (were one actually needed) to be careful.

The two men below, with infinite care, edged the ladder up the wall, until, with a scarcely perceptible sound, it rested against the window-sill. Higgins smiled as he noticed the argument below in dumb-show as to who should be the first to mount the ladder. The fact that Soapy, who had seemed so dreadfully afraid of the "voice," argued at all, indicated that the other, whoever he was, was certainly *not* the mysterious owner of that voice. After a moment or two the pair quietly retired for no apparent reason. Higgins was quick to accept the chance offered.

"Tommy!"

The youth hurried across, and the inspector quickly opened the casement window.

"Quick!" Together they seized hold of the topmost rung and started to haul the ladder into the library. It was half-way through the window when there was a flash from the corner of the house, and Hamper released his hold, leaving the dead weight of the ladder to the inspector. Higgins glanced round quickly, apprehensive that the young man had been hit, but, being reassured upon that point, his expression changed to one of mild reproach. Tommy was ashamed. A moment later the pair of them had hauled the ladder into the room.

Higgins mopped the perspiration from his brow with an already damp handkerchief.

"Gosh! That was a near thing, Tommy."

"I—I'm sorry about——"

"That's all right. I'm older, and possibly more experienced." He peered out of the window. "Bit o' luck they can't see us, else they might try to snipe us from a tree or something."

As though in answer to his challenge, without a word

of warning the chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and holding a pair of electric globes, sprang into light.

"Duck, Tommy, duck!" A fusillade of shots rang out as the pair threw themselves to the floor.

The departure of Soapy and the other was now explained. They were going to turn on the lights of the library from a main switch. In this all-revealing light neither of the prisoners of the room could prevent an entry through the window were another ladder procured.

"This'll never do, Tommy," said Higgins, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, as he realised that the youngster was wilting under the strain. To their assailants outside it must have been apparent by this time that the inspector was unarmed, and also that the inspector was not the only stranger in the room. Tommy's presence must have given them further food for thought. Higgins wondered how long the battle could go on without the curiosity of the village being aroused. His eye fell upon the coalscuttle, and it seemed as though some of his difficulties might be solved. He picked up a sizeable piece of coal and handed it to Hamper, taking a similar piece himself. Then he pointed to the electric globes, and winked cheerfully.

They hurled together. Tommy's was a bull's-eye, but the inspector's was woefully at sea. There was a "plop" and the tinkle of falling glass. One of the electric globes was out of action. Three minutes later the room was in darkness.

"Good shooting, Tommy!"

"I used to play cover-point at school."

"Ah. That accounts for it." Inspector Higgins was pleased at the boy's remark. It showed that he was bearing up much better. "Now gimme a hand with this ladder. Try and push it up the chimney."

Unfortunately it would not go. The ladder was too long and the angle too acute.

"Never mind, Tommy. We must chance it."

Higgins felt the staple he had tried before. It was still warm, but bearable to the touch.

"I'll go first—you must follow. If you slip that absurd mask over your mouth it'll keep out most of the soot. Why didn't you take it off before?"

"Didn't want him to recognise me," with a jerked thumb, indicating Sanderson.

"Lord! I'd almost forgotten about him. Here, lend a hand with this ladder; it'll be useful after all. We don't want our friend here to fall over with the chair and let 'em in that way."

They placed the top of the ladder against the top panel, thrust the bound man's head between two of the rungs, then jammed the foot of the ladder in one of the bookshelves, removing half a dozen books to pave the way. It fitted firmly and snugly.

"You keep the ladder nicely in position, Sanderson. Should they break down the door they'll probably break your neck as well. I shan't be sorry."

"Now then, Tommy. Never crow over a fallen opponent. It isn't done." Once more they returned to the fireplace, and again the inspector essayed an ascent of the chimney. The air inside was almost stifling, but the staples led upwards. His ascent dislodged a quantity of soot, and he regretted that he had not let the boy precede him, for the falling soot must have made the lad's the harder task. A slope in the angle of the chimney then a dim square overhead a shade less dark than the surrounding blackness.

Inspector Higgins felt for his electric torch, then remembered it was in his overcoat in the library below. He had a box of matches, though. After a great deal of trouble he managed to strike one. The draught of the chimney immediately extinguished it. The nearer they got to the top, however, the less dark the chimney seemed. Pity about that torch! Had to feel all round for the next staple, meanwhile dislodging sackloads of soot upon

Tommy below. Nearly at the top now. Only another seven feet. . . .

Again Inspector Higgins felt round the wall. Yes, there was no doubt about it! There were no more staples. And still seven feet to go. Well, there was nothing for it but to travel mountaineering fashion, by bracing the back against one wall and the feet against the opposite wall, and squirming upwards. Perfectly simple. Oh, yes! Perfectly simple—I don't think! Too damned dark! And supposing the chimney widened just a trifle as one were squirming upwards? A slip—and the pair of them would be precipitated on to the dead ashes of the fire below, provided they didn't impale themselves on one of the broken staples going down. And Tommy's legs were probably too short to "walk" up the chimney.

A sudden gust of wind and a cloud of smoke belched down the shaft. Higgins shut his eyes and gripped the staple. Tommy coughed and spluttered just beneath him, but hung on manfully. The shaft slowly cleared of smoke. Then Higgins discovered that just above him was the inlet of another chimney where it joined the main shaft, and it was from this that the smoke was pouring upwards. This, too, had to be passed—and quickly, too. The air was foul enough without the addition of smoke.

Inspector Higgins tried to wriggle upwards, but found that the heat and smoke from the other shaft were too much. He eased himself down again to the comparative security of the staple. If he could but stand upon that last staple he could almost reach the top.

"Buck up, guv'nor. Buck up!" An agonised whisper from the boy underneath.

"Better go back again, sonny," began the inspector kindly, but stopped as the sound of splintering wood reached their ears from the library. A moment later there was a rush of feet and a cry as the discovery that the two were missing was made. Further scurrying, then that cold, menacing voice.

"The chimney. That's where they are." A moment's silence, then the sound of a shot reverberated deafeningly up the shaft, and the chimney was filled with particles of soot dislodged by the percussion. Higgins mentally blessed that fortuitous change in the angle of the chimney.

"Ah!"—again that hideous voice. "I have an inspiration. Yes, it is an inspiration. We will—er—relight the fire."

"Gawd!" Tommy's voice shook.

"Yes. Relight the fire. And, I think, a little petrol is indicated. Soapy, fetch a can from the garage, and some paper and wood. No, wait a moment. We'll take a shovel each and transfer the fire from the dining-room. You, Sanderson, stand here and shoot 'em if they come down. I suppose you feel well enough to do that?"—a wealth of sarcasm. "And don't make any more mistakes"—threateningly.

Finis. . . . And that poor kid below. . . . And Jill Crawford waiting hopefully for his return. . . . A stupendous effort was called for, that stifling inlet of the other chimney must be passed. Higgins pulled himself upwards for a desperate attempt, then gasped with astonishment. The heat and smoke from that other chimney had subsided and the place was now humanly bearable. The explanation flashed through his brain. This must be the outlet from the dining-room, from which even at this moment the fire was being transferred to the library. There was not a moment to lose.

"Tommy, Tommy! I'm going to hang on to one staple and you've got to try and pass me. Make as much noise as you like—Sanderson 'll think we're trying to clamber down. But buck up!" His voice was intense in its urgency.

A nerve-racking minute.

Inspector Higgins hung on to the top staple and stretched his legs across the chimney. Tommy Hamper clambered up the staples below as quickly as the impenetrable darkness would allow.

"Now seat yourself in the outlet just above me. If I'd got any guts I'd scramble down to the dining-room and try to escape that way, but I haven't"—whimsically. "Buck up!"

Higgins braced himself as the youngster scrambled over his body, and a moment later he felt the weight lifted as Tommy seated himself on the angle formed by the junction of the two chimneys.

Then, with a stupendous effort, he dragged his knees upwards and placed his feet on the penultimate staple. Steadying himself by holding on to one of Tommy's feet, he managed to get his feet on the top support, then he leaned over in the darkness until he could feel the opposite wall of the chimney. With great muscular effort he "walked" upwards with his hands until he was almost perpendicular, then:

"Up on my back, Tommy."

A short period of immense strain, mental rather than physical, then with a sigh Tommy reached the top of the chimney and began to crawl out. At that precise moment a gust of smoke curled fitfully up the chimney. Tommy's smoke-begrimed face peered over the top of the brickwork.

"S-s-stand clear, Tommy."

Inspector Higgins tiptoed on the last staple and just managed to touch the top of the chimney. Not good enough. Young Hamper gripped his wrists in a misguided offer of help.

"Leggo, you idiot!"

Higgins had once more to slip downwards. He slowly turned round until his back was against the brickwork. Then he forced his feet against the opposite wall and bent his knees. He edged his back a few inches up the wall. Another movement of his feet, then another bracing of his knees, and his back scraped upwards. . . .

At last! Higgins gripped the top of the brickwork

and with a magnificent effort hurled himself upwards, and breathed in the cool air in mighty gulps. There was a subdued roar down the chimney. He flung himself clear. Then a sheet of flame shot upwards.

CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH THERE IS SOME LOCAL RIVALRY

INSPECTOR HIGGINS subsided weakly on the angle of the sloping roof, and would possibly have fallen but for the helping hand of Thomas Hamper. The sheet of flame illuminated their precarious position.

After the stifling atmosphere of the chimney the air of the roof-top was chilling.

The sheet of flame subsided as quickly as it had arisen. The petrol had burnt itself out in a flash. Would the "voice" make the same mistake again? Higgins sincerely hoped so, for should he do so, then, without a doubt, the whole countryside would be aroused. Another sheet of flame as the last, and the fire brigade must inevitably be summoned by some well-meaning villager.

Although the flash had illuminated the roof and a good deal of the surrounding countryside, the darkness following was even more intense to the eyes of the fugitives. It took quite three minutes for their sight to adjust itself.

Inspector Higgins surveyed the outlook gloomily.

"I reckon we're a damn sight worse off than we were in the library," he remarked dejectedly.

"Lumme, guv'nor. You don't half cheer anyone up," was the lugubrious response, which had the immediate result, possibly as the boy intended, of a subdued chortle from the inspector.

The chimney was in the centre of the roof, which sloped downwards on either side. It was level for a few feet on both of the other sides of the rectangle, but in due course these declined to the ends. At each end, in the centre of the walls, a small chimney-stack rose a

few inches above the gutters. A lead gutter ran round the entire edge of the roof, and apparently there was a drainpipe at each of the four corners. Inspector Higgins and the youth sat astraddle the angle of the level portion of the roof where the two longer sides met, and took stock of their surroundings.

"And—er—now to get down."

"Yes, sir. Bit of a proposition, ain't it?"

"An' it's damned cold and damned dark. That doesn't help much."

To add to their troubles it started to rain. They turned up the collars of their jackets and shivered, sheltering as best they could in the lee of the square chimney-stack. The rain did not last long, but the roof was wet and slippery. Then the climax—it began to freeze. A dense volume of smoke poured from the chimney—the petrol effort had apparently ignited such of the soot as the two fugitives had failed to dislodge. Thus, whilst the rain near the stack was quickly dried, that a few feet away began to freeze.

"Come along, Tommy. I'm going to the end of this straight piece to see what our chances are at the end. You'd better follow. Ease yourself along the angle as if you were playing leap-frog on an elephant's back."

Arrived at the horizontal edge of the roof, the short chimney-stack in the middle of the wall at the end of the slope could be more plainly discerned. Inspector Higgins turned on his stomach and eased himself gently down the slope until his arms were at full stretch, his hands gripping the top tile.

"How far are my feet from the chimney, Tommy?" he gasped.

"About ten feet."

"Well, grip my hands and let me down a bit further."

Tommy did as he was bidden, but the inspector's weight was too much for him. Their hands slowly slipped —the newly-formed ice did the rest. Higgins skidded

down the remainder of the slope, his left foot hit the chimney-stack with a smack, his fingernails fought desperately for a hold, his body slewed to the right, and the next moment he was hanging by his fingers to the edge of the lead guttering, some four feet from the chimney-stack.

Desperately he moved, an inch at a time, along the gutter, with a silent prayer that it would hold his weight, then, utilising his great strength, he pulled himself upwards until his legs embraced the chimney-stack. The rest was comparatively easy and a moment later he was sitting uncomfortably with his back against the chimney, passing a weary hand across his brow.

"Much more o' this, Tommy, and I'll chuck me hand in!"

Young Hamper did not hear. He was sitting on the angle of the roof, his face buried in his hands—shuddering.

Inspector Higgins surveyed his surroundings from his new position. Yes! He had been quite right in his first surmise—a drainpipe did run from the roof groundwards at the corners of the house. But how to get down? He must walk along the gutter—if walk was the word. With one hand on the sloping roof he should be able to manage it. The gutter must hold if it could bear the terrific strain to which it had just been subjected.

His progress to the end of the roof was perfectly simple, and was accomplished in a few seconds. The drainpipe looked pretty substantial. He firmly believed he could descend to the ground by this method—but Tommy? What of Tommy? The boy was still as he had been when the inspector had glanced in his direction, save that his eyes were no longer shielded by his hands. To escape by the drainpipe would be beyond *his* powers. His nerve would not stand it.

"Tommy!"

The youngster looked up.

"I'm going for help—I shan't be long. You'll have to stay up there. Keep smiling."

He lowered himself over the edge of the gutter, then tested the drainpipe. It was firmly attached to the wall by means of staples, placed conveniently to hand every ten feet or so. Higgins could have wished for them to be at more frequent intervals, but by this time he was thankful for small mercies.

Two-thirds of the way down, for no apparent reason, the drainpipe ceased. After a minute of effectual groping with his feet, Inspector Higgins ventured a downward glance. It was too dark to see a great deal, save that the ground seemed to be about eighteen feet below the end of the pipe. He made a rough mental calculation. If he were to grip the extreme end of the pipe with his hands, his feet would then be about ten feet from the ground. At the worst he would get a broken leg—at the best a nasty jar. But needs must . . .

Inspector Higgins lowered himself carefully hand over hand until at last he was hanging at the very end of the drainpipe. A timid moon peeped out from behind the edge of the clouds, so, taking advantage of the luminant thus offered, he glanced downwards.

"You know, my dear Inspector, you ought to have been a cat-burglar."

Standing below him, idly twirling a revolver on the index finger of his right hand, was the mighty Sanderson. Gone from his features was the sickly dread of an hour ago—a cynical triumphant smile in its place. Playfully the man directed at Higgins the beam of an electric torch!

Holy—hell! . . . But this was the last straw!

. . . . . .

"Oi wish Oi'd never said nuthin'."

The village constable thus spoke, plaintively, to his wife. Bitterly he regretted that, in a moment of exuberance, he had hinted that the photograph on the notice-board at the County Police Station looked uncommonly

like one of the gentlemen at the big house in his village. It was just a casual remark, not intended for official recognition, yet the superintendent who happened to be passing had immediately seized upon it and had harried him for particulars.

Osbert Gander was happy in the placid existence of the village constable. Anything outside the official routine worried him, and to think that, on this occasion, it had been brought about by his own unguarded statement was particularly galling.

Of course, the photograph was undoubtedly like Mr. Raymond of the big house—in fact Osbert could almost have sworn that it was him: yet . . . Dang it all! He didn't want any trouble with the others there! That Mr. Sanderson was a nice enough chap, and the little butler-fellow always stood his round at the Humming Top.

Yes. His wish that he had refrained from speaking was very sincere.

That awful walk with the Lunnon inspector up to the lodge gates had been very nerve-racking. For the life of him he couldn't think what to say. The inspector seemed a decent enough sort of fellow, but . . .

"Never moind, Ossy. It may mean promotion."

"Or the sack"—lugubriously.

A silence fell upon the the pair. Constable Osbert Gander had just returned from escorting Inspector Higgins to the lodge gates of the big house, and he was feeling somewhat overcome.

" 'E may call 'ere on 'is way baack."

It was now Mrs. Gander's turn to be perturbed. Lawks! The house wasn't fit for an inspector from London—the curtains were not due to be changed till next Saturday, and Osbert had been gardening the day before and had trampled all over the house in his dirty boots; and all they had to eat was half a rabbit-pie, left over from yesterday; and . . .

"You poached the rabbit, Ossy"—accusingly and in great distress.

"Lawks! So Oi did. D'ye reckon 'e'd find out?"

"Oi—Oi 'opes not. Go an' see if 'e's comin'."

Police-constable Osbert Gander placed on his gardening cap and strutted down the village street to the corner which afforded a view of the road leading to the big house. Regulation trousers, official tunic unbuttoned at the neck, and a cap—any superintendent seeing him at this moment must surely have fainted from the shock! He cast a wistful eye through the open door of the Humming Top, licked his lips, and passed on.

At the corner he stopped. The road was clear of pedestrians and vehicles. Ardently he hoped that the inspector would *not* pay a visit to his humble abode before setting out for the town.

No—not a sign, thank goodness. He was just turning away with a sigh of thankfulness when a vivid sheet of flame shot heavenwards from the direction of the big house.

"By Goles! . . . Cripes!" He stared for one brief moment, then pelted back to the village. He might be bucolic and sleepy in his general outlook on life, but here was something that he understood—something which required immediate action. He reached his house and then with great gusto he tolled a bell attached to the wall, which served as a signal for the turning out of the village volunteer fire brigade. Immediately all in the village was bustle—not necessarily confusion—and a concerted rush was made for the barn in which the primitive fire-fighting apparatus was housed. The constable had his stereotyped duties governing such an emergency. He telephoned from the official instrument in his sitting-room (dusty from long disuse and from Mrs. Gander's homely mistrust and aversion for such contraptions) to the fire brigade in the town two miles away, then he dashed to the barn.

The "engine" consisted of a hand-cart upon which was fixed a serviceable hand-pump and a length of canvas hose. The "brigade"—cowhands and tenant-farmers mostly—set off at a jog-trot for the big house, propelling the engine, and followed by an eager crowd of non-members. A village fire never lacked willing helpers.

The town fire-brigade boasted a motor engine, and there was much rivalry between the professionals and the amateurs. In fact, it was a very sore point with the villagers that Constable Gander was compelled to summon the town brigade before they tried and failed themselves to subdue any fire! Thus the jog-trot developed into an undignified gallop—for the distance to the big house was such that, unless they got a move on, the townies, with their motor, would reach the fire first! Even now the clanging bell of the motor engine could plainly be heard. Attaboy!

Inspector Higgins clung precariously from the end of the drainpipe and cast an eye at his tormentor. He measured the distance, braced his feet against the wall—then jumped. The move was totally unexpected as far as Sanderson was concerned, mainly because the inspector had jumped *at* him. He tried to dodge the hurtling form, but he had no time. The impact not only knocked all the breath out of Sanderson's body, but an infinitely more serious matter, also knocked the revolver from his hand, together with the electric torch.

As regards the inspector, he suffered neither a broken leg nor a nasty jar, for the bulky Sanderson served as a buffer, and broke his fall. He jumped up, seized the fallen flashlamp and incontinently bolted. The torch, by reason of its beam, found itself—he dared not wait to find the revolver in the darkness.

. . . . . .

A wildly-cheering mob turned in the lodge gates and charged up the gravelled path. Inspector Higgins hid behind some shrubbery somewhat bewildered. The comic

fire-brigade had arrived, and before the townies—hence the jubilation. Higgins breathed a sigh of thankfulness—Tommy would be rescued.

Then once more he hid behind the shrubbery—unless he was very much mistaken something was due to happen in the very near future.

It happened!

A low whine—a louder hum—then a titanic roar. From the back of the house leapt a high-powered car. A screech of brakes—a squeal as the tyres skidded on the gravel—then it was upon them. It scattered the villagers right and left, completely wrecked the primitive engine, then bore down to the gates at an alarming speed. The man who had helped Soapy with the ladder was at the wheel, with Soapy at his side. At the back of the car was the huge bulk of Sanderson—and at his side another, muffled to the eyes with a cap pulled low over his forehead.

Inspector Higgins stepped from his place of concealment, thankful even for the puny light of the moon, pencil in one hand, notebook in the other. The car flashed by and a shot rang out. Higgins was unperturbed.

"KK or XX 57936. That'll be something to go on, anyway." Then his eyes noticed the lodge gates. He sighed.

"Lord!" he muttered. "If I'd only thought of shutting the gates I could have piled up the whole shoot of 'em. I must be getting old."

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH A CAR IS BORROWED

THE brutal philosophy of Inspector Higgins was interrupted by the furious clanging of a fire-bell. Nearer and nearer it came, and then the fire-engine flashed by the lodge gates. Higgins immediately cupped his hands and let out a fearsome yell, then waved his arms frantically to attract the attention of the brass-helmeted fire-fighters. He was seen at once, and with a grinding of brakes the fire-engine skidded to a stop a hundred yards or so further up the road. Then began the tedious business of backing, carried out with remarkable skill on the part of the driver. The fire-engine at last turned into the gates.

"There's a man on the roof!" shouted Higgins as the engine passed him, and the rearmost fireman waved an acknowledgment.

The fire-escape, a long ladder-like structure, appeared a minute or two later and followed the engine up the gravelled drive.

Inspector Higgins at last decided that it was safe to venture into the roadway, when there was a further clanging of a bell, and a private car turned into the gates. It was the Fire Brigade Superintendent arriving in style. Higgins held up his hand and the car drew to a standstill. A helmeted head was thrust out of the rear window.

"Straight ahead?" it queried.

"Can I borrow your car?"

The superintendent was nonplussed—and looked it. "Well, of all the confounded——" he began weakly, when the inspector interrupted what had every appearance of developing into a diatribe in lurid vernacular by present-

ing his official card, and muttering the one word: "Urgent."

"Sorry," said the other ungraciously. "I'm on duty. Stand aside."

Inspector Higgins, essentially a fair-minded man, knew that he was wasting his own and the other's time, so he did not persist. Then he had an inspiration, which had the added attraction of being perfectly true. Again he muttered but a single word:

"Incendiarism."

"What?" the other shouted, scandalised.

"In a car now. Gone five minutes"—cryptically.

One thing about the superintendent immediately endeared him to the inspector. Whether it was the result of his calling, his training, or whatever it was—he made an instantaneous decision.

"Drive?"

Higgins nodded.

"Jump in. We must get along to the fire."

Suiting the action to the word, the superintendent and his chauffeur immediately alighted, the former waved Higgins to the latter's vacant seat and started off for the house at the double. The chauffeur at once followed in his wake, but found time to whisper pridefully to Higgins: "She can do eighty."

Inspector Higgins jumped into the car, and slowly backed out of the drive, turned and started after the fugitives—seven minutes behind. The car was a beauty—the engine running with perfect rhythm—but seven minutes' leeway was a lot to make up.

Higgins set his teeth and pressed on the accelerator with his foot. The needle of the speedometer pointed to thirty—thirty-five—forty—forty-five—fifty—and there it wavered—first above then slightly below. Inspector Higgins knew his limitations. Although he could drive a car, he was by no means an expert at the game. Fifty miles an hour was more than his limit of safety, and he knew it.

That he could still—if the driver's statement could be believed—get another thirty miles an hour out of the car was beside the point. To travel at fifty was straining his ability; to exceed this speed—his skill being what it was—would be foolish, if not fatal.

A comforting thought was that the fugitives could not yet be aware that the hunt was up. They would probably guess that Inspector Higgins would endeavour to obtain a car and take up the chase, but that he should already be on their track would not enter into their calculations.

Unfortunately for them, they would be torn between two desires—each as urgent as the other. Firstly, to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the old house, and secondly—not to go at such a speed as would involve police interference. True, it was dark, and, as Higgins had discovered, traffic on this road was seemingly non-existent.

The inspector, too, was in a quandary. Whilst he was so close upon his quarry, could he afford the time to stop and telephone ahead? For one thing, at this time of night, were he to get prompt connection with the police, the task of notifying outlying districts would be very great. He decided, rightly or wrongly, to take his chance of catching up with the other car, and to leave any telephoning to such opportunity as might be thrown in his direction.

The road, unfortunately, was none too good, and sundry ice-bound portions of the track added to his danger. It did not help matters a great deal when he considered that the other car was in a similar plight. Another minor matter, which nevertheless did not tend to soothe his nerves, was the fact that every time the surface of the road became uneven the bell at his side rattled, and on one occasion when he passed over a particularly sizeable lump, it rang with an ear-splitting clang.

The shadows thrown by his powerful headlights merely served to accentuate the pitfalls and hollows in the road-bed.

He flashed through a sleepy village before the inhabitants knew he was even coming. A railway arch in the distance, illuminated by an electric standard overhead, seemed to leap towards him, roared overhead, and a second or two later was fifty yards behind.

Then, a mile ahead, he could just make out the tail-lights of another car at the top of a rise, which disappeared in the distance as he negotiated a slight bend. When next he caught sight of the lights they were appreciably nearer—he was overtaking the car very quickly. A minute later he thought he could distinguish the sound of her engine, but this was extremely unlikely. The very speed with which he was catching up with this car in front filled him with misgiving. This could not be the car he was chasing, for the "voice" and his satellites would scarcely leave their tail-lights showing to guide a possible pursuer. Unless, of course, they were not yet aware of any pursuit. If this were their car, the speed it was travelling as compared with the speed of which it was undoubtedly capable seemed to suggest that its occupants were not so aware.

"At this rate," reflected the inspector, "I shall pass it in a few moments."

Another problem! Should he make enquiries of the occupants of the car in front? Was the consequent delay worth the information?

He was overtaking the car so quickly that he decided he would have to slow up, for the first essential was that he check the car's registration number. And having to slow up, he might just as well come to a stop and ask a few questions. Regretfully he reduced his speed. Immediately the other car accelerated, there was a flash, a splintering of his windscreen, and a resonant clang of the

fire-bell at his side caused by the impact of the bullet. The resultant vibrational humming of the bell seemed to penetrate into his very brain.

Of one thing he was thankful. There was no further need to ask questions of the car in front. They were already answered. He peered ahead through the broken glass. All the lights of the other car were now extinguished, and he wondered whether he dare turn off his own. For his own safety he decided against this procedure, but it placed him at a very grave disadvantage. He must so gauge his speed that whilst keeping up with the car in front he must not get within pistol-shot. He was unarmed. This was bad enough during the siege of an hour ago—now it might prove fatal. Yet he argued within himself plaintively, how was he to know, when he had started from Scotland Yard to test the accuracy of a village constable's observations, that he should have gone armed to such a seemingly inoffensive task?

Damnation! This cautious policy would get him nowhere. Unless he knew how far ahead the other car was, he stood a darn good chance of losing it altogether. He accelerated once more, but had to ease down to turn a corner. Then—hastily he applied his brakes.

Standing in the middle of the road, one hand extended in a signal demanding a halt, and the other shielding his eyes from the glare of the inspector's headlights, stood a uniformed policeman.

Higgins sounded his ear-splitting klaxon in an effort to clear the way, but the man refused to budge. At another time Higgins would have commended him for his devotion to his duty, but now——

"Get to hell out of it!" he yelled, the tyres of the car screeching on the hard surface of the road. Nothing doing! The car drew to a halt and the constable advanced, drawing a notebook from the tail-pocket of his uniform.

"D'ye think ye own the road or what?" he demanded, his voice squeaky with emotion. "You're the second car in three minutes——"

"Can you read?" demanded the inspector viciously, thrusting his card into the other's hand. The constable pulled out a pocket flashlamp and surveyed the piece of pasteboard. His whole demeanour underwent a complete change.

"Sorry, sir, I'm sure. Didn't know you was with the other car."

"What d'y'mean?"

"There was a uniformed p'lice officer in the car in front, so I thought——"

"Sure?"

"Yessir. I thought maybe they was in fancy dress or something, so I took their number and was just going to report it—in case like."

"The number?"

The constable turned back one of the leaves of his notebook, then read out solemnly:

"XX 57936."

"That's the car all right." Here was a heaven-sent opportunity. "'Phone that number to the station. Car must be apprehended at all costs. You'll know the general direction."

"Yessir. They went straight ahead, then took the turning to the right. You can't miss it."

Higgins let in his clutch and forged ahead, taking the turning on the right, a few seconds later, on two wheels. Bit o' luck, meeting that cop! Smart fellow too! Got the number pat enough . . . Though, now he came to think about it, how the devil, if the car in front was showing no lights, had the constable——

It was all over in a flash! A bend in the road, then five yards ahead was a massive iron gate. Automatically the inspector jabbed on his brakes, the car slewed round

and struck the gate broadside on. There was a tremendous crash, and the car turned slowly on its side.

Then the dolorous clanging of the fire-bell, as, perfectly balanced amid the wreckage, it appeared to be tolling the knell of the departing spirit of the still form which lay huddled underneath.

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR IS ATTACKED

THE first impression recorded on the returning consciousness of Inspector Higgins was that of intense cold. His next—that he was unable to move. Now, how the deuce had he got into this mess?

He frowned in a concentrated effort of thought, and slowly the recent happenings began to percolate through his memory. The chase—the policeman—and lastly, the iron gate. And now he supposed he was bound hand and foot and completely in the power of the mysterious "voice." Then, as his brain became clearer, he discovered that he had supposed wrongly. He could not move because of something heavy on his chest. The only heavy thing he could think of at the moment was Mr. Sanderson, but surely he had no corners?

Then the explanation flashed through his brain—he was still under the wreckage of the car. Whimsically he wondered what the Fire Brigade Superintendent would say about it! From the way he had started when Higgins had asked if he might borrow the car he should be able to express himself fairly pithily! A tentative explorative movement of his foot, and Higgins found that he was not so firmly secured as he had thought. He wriggled, and was badly startled when again the fire-bell began to toll, although it sounded muffled.

He was surprised to find that it was no longer pitch dark.

Another sinuous move, and one arm was free. He turned slightly, and thereby released the other.

To extricate himself from the debris of the car was a severe struggle, but he battled worthily. His feet were

the worst job—not that he suffered from the traditional large feet of his profession, but they seemed inextricably mixed up with the wire of the klaxon horn.

At last it was accomplished and he stepped from the ruins. Gingerly he felt over his body. Barring the fact that the bump occasioned by Constable Goldfinch's lack of forethought, which had almost vanished the previous day, was once more in its full glory, he appeared to have escaped serious injury.

"Born lucky," he muttered thankfully.

He attributed his escape to two factors. Firstly, that his new-formed suspicion of the *bona fides* of the constable had caused him automatically to reduce speed with the half-formed idea of going back, and thus he had not been travelling nearly so fast as he might have been; and secondly, to the wonderful upholstery of the car, for he had found himself wedged between two thickly-padded cushions, which had protected him from broken bones. The bump on his head had apparently been caused by the woodwork of the body when the car had overturned.

And the intense cold was now explained, as was the slightly decreased blackness of the night, for, whilst he had been lying unconscious a mantle of snow, nearly an inch thick, had covered the countryside.

And now to collect his thoughts.

Dimly he had wondered why the tremendous noise occasioned by the collision with the gate had not aroused the house to which the gate must give entrance; this was easily explained by a notice pasted on the right-hand support of the gate, advertising the coming sale of the property, with vacant possession.

And the constable who had wilfully misdirected him? Of course, *his* object had been to send the inspector and the car to perdition. Yet surely it would have been by far the easier plan to shoot the inspector who had been so conveniently unsuspecting. Had the bogus constable done so he would have had the additional problem of disposing

of the car with its prominent fire-bell. Possibly they had considered that misdirection would be the safer course, and again, it was possible that his very gullibility had saved his life. Possibly they had considered (quite erroneously that to murder a police-inspector would give an added incentive to any police action. (Murder was murder, whoever the victim—no added incentive being needed.)

And why had the bogus constable gone to the trouble to explain that there was a uniformed police official in the other car? The explanation in this case was fairly simple. The man must have donned the uniform whilst the chase had been in progress—in all probability had been wearing it when the inspector had at last caught up with them—and, for all they knew, Higgins might have noticed it just before the shot was fired.

And who was the pseudo-constable? It certainly wasn't Sanderson—his bulk alone was against this. Neither was it Soapy—for the same reason, but from the other end of the scale. It might, of course, have been Soapy's helper with the ladder—but he had been driving, and so could not possibly have changed into a constable's uniform on the way. And if it were not he, then it must have been the "voice."

And Higgins had met him face to face!

At least—not exactly face to face. Inspector Higgins strove to remember the man's features, but was baffled. Whilst the headlights had been shining upon him he had carefully shielded his face, ostensibly to protect his eyes from the glare, so Higgins had seen nothing. Out of the headlights the darkness was intense, so again the inspector had seen nothing. And the man's voice? Cold and calculating? No, certainly not—speaking with emotion. That was how Higgins had described it to himself.

Still, if the man had not made the mistake of knowing the car's number, Higgins's suspicions, however belated, would not have been aroused—he would never have re-

duced speed—and even now might be lying stark and . . .

A lot of "ifs" about this sort of reasoning. And here he was, sitting down like a stuffed mummy, moralising, whilst . . .

He staggered to his feet, squared his shoulders, and started back down the road in the snow. He reached the corner which he had taken on two wheels so glibly after his meeting with the constable. There was a painted notice there which, in his violent hurry, he had missed before. He flashed the torch, glad to find it uninjured, and read the notice. "Private Road."

"Thank you very much," he said, and probably would have raised his hat were it not lying on the library table of the big house. Fancy! That was two hats in two days—irretrievably lost. Irretrievably? Well, he might get the one back from the big house if it weren't burned down by this time. And that wasn't a hat, it was a cap! Higgins was generally meticulous in his statements. Here! Steady on, old chap! Pull yourself together. Lose your hat if you like, but not your head!

Inspector Higgins turned to the left into the main road. Here the snow was much trampled, and he was amazed at the amount of traffic which must have passed since the snow had fallen, and so early in the morning too, until he realised that the trampling had been done by a herd of cattle, which was probably on its way to market. He stumbled on his way, then stopped. It was just about here that he had the absurd interview with the bogus constable. Just about here—— Good gracious! What was that?

Standing back from the road was a small cottage, plastered with "To Let" and "To be sold" notices—lot of vacant property here!—with curtainless windows and an uninhabited air. Yet from the roadway to the front door, impressed in the snow, were the footprints of a single person. Whoever had entered this empty house

must obviously still be there, for the footprints led towards the cottage—unless the person had left the place by the back way. It might, of course, be the "voice," but in any case an occupant of an ostensibly empty house is simply asking for enquiry.

Higgins crept round the house under cover of a convenient box-hedge surrounding it. Barring that one line of footprints the cottage stood in virgin snow. The footprints were those of a man, and, in his present state the inspector did not feel competent to tackle him alone. The prosaic explanation was that the man was the owner of the property. Then again it might be that a tramp had gone into the empty cottage for shelter from the snow, and was even now asleep within. Against this was the fact that the footprints went straight to the front door—there was no preliminary investigation of windows. Must be the owner or his representative. Yet this was where he had seen the policeman.

Higgins went a few yards further up the road, undecided. Then he resumed his course back to the last town. A hundred yards further on he heard the sounds of a horse and trap coming up behind. He stopped. It was a mail-van, red and box-shaped, with a uniformed postman in front, driving. The inspector stepped into the roadway and held up his hand. The resultant effect was entirely different from his expectations—the man gave him one startled look, slashed the horse with his whip, made a mighty swipe at Higgins as he clattered past, and a few seconds later had disappeared in the distance. Higgins stood perfectly still until the sounds of the horse's hooves could be heard no more, then he walked to a gate, climbed up it wearily, then perched himself precariously on the top bar. Philosophically he searched for his pipe, tobacco and matches. And then he grinned. Now he came to think about it, he *was* in a mess. His face undoubtedly was grimed with soot from the chimney of the big house,

his clothes were torn as a result of the same adventure and from the smash, and, taking it by and large, the postman could not be blamed for his precipitate flight.

. . . . . .

And as for the postman. A most unwarranted and vicious attack had been attempted upon His Majesty's Mails by a tramp. Highway robbery! He lashed at his horse and galloped away. For the first time in twenty years he passed his Post Office ahead of the scheduled time. The fact that he passed at all caused grave misquiet to the sub-postmistress. Either his horse was bolting or he was drunk—that was her verdict. He dashed up to the sub-police station at the very edge of the town, jumped from his seat, and a moment later was serving out a thrilling story to the stolid sergeant-in-charge. Possibly, but for his patent excitement, he would not have been believed. As it was . . .

. . . . . .

Before Inspector Higgins was aware of what was happening they were upon him. A concerted surprise attack by a sergeant, three constables, and an excited postman who kept well into the background was entirely successful. Higgins's first warning was an agitated cry of:

"There 'e be!"

A moment later, before the inspector had time to remove the pipe from his mouth, he was completely surrounded. He had a momentary misgiving that it was the "voice's" crowd, but the sight of the postman not only reassured him, but gave him an insight as to what actually had happened.

"I want you." It was the sergeant speaking. Higgins vouchsafed no reply, merely feeling for a card, which he handed to the officer. He seemed to be handing out official cards like handbills these days. The sergeant was suitably impressed, but stared at the disreputable inspector in amazement. Then:

"In disguise, sir?" he queried diffidently.

Higgins laughed. "Er—not exactly. I'm sorry you've had your journey for nothing, but . . . By the way, to whom does that cottage a little further along the road belong?"

"Dunno, sir. Whoever it is, he's asking too much. Can't let or sell it."

"Yet there's someone in it now."

"There is?"—eagerly. "Then our journey has not been for nothing. Come along boys."

"The man inside may be dangerous."

The sergeant simply looked at the inspector, and Higgins needed no further rebuke.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH A SUPERINTENDENT FAILS TO OBLIGE

THE uniformed sergeant surveyed the footprints with professional interest. Now that the dawn had broken they were much more distinct.

"Drunk!" he muttered disappointedly. Indeed, his accusation against the intruder at the house seemed well supported, for the footprints (about fourteen in number) were distributed in a somewhat erratic manner. The direction was uniform but the spacing between each print was uneven.

Stolidly he marched up to the front door and knocked peremptorily. One of the constables walked round to the back of the house, whilst the remaining pair each peered into a window either side of the front door. There was no answer, neither was there any sound of movement within. Inspector Higgins was an interested spectator from the roadside. Another unfruitful knock, and the sergeant produced a knife, slipped the catch of the right-hand window, and asked one of the underlings for a "bunk-up." Three minutes later he reappeared at the front door with a look of utter astonishment upon his face.

"Empty!" he called out to Higgins, dramatically.

He was right.

The house was bare, even of furniture, save a deal table upon which rested a flimsy envelope, and a broken chair. Higgins picked up the envelope. On the outside was printed: "Notepaper. 4 sheets and 4 envelopes. One Penny. Value! Value!! VALUE!!!" The contents, taking into consideration the texture of the three remaining envelopes and sheets of paper, had possibly been worth one

farthing. For some unaccountable reason the stationer had forgotton to mention that the envelope had also contained a sheet of blotting-paper!

Higgins held the sheet of blotting-paper to the light to read the following message.

Meet to-morrow night here at cottage.

Nothing more. The envelope had apparently been allowed to dry.

The sergeant was stamping about the rooms badly puzzled. His muddied trail from the window through which he had entered to the front door was plainly visible. Inspector Higgins beckoned the man towards him.

"When you entered, Sergeant, were there any foot-marks in the rooms like yours?"

"No, sir. Now you come to mention it, there weren't."

"And why?"

"It licks me, sir."

"I'll tell you. The man, whoever he was, entered the house before the snow fell. When the time came for him to go, he found the inch of snow outside, so he merely walked out—backwards!"

"Lumme! That was cute!"

"Very. I ought to have noticed the erratic spacing of the steps. It's a lesson."

"But why did he do that, sir?"

"Because, I imagine, he was quick to seize upon an opportunity. We have accomplished his purpose."

"And that was?"

"To invite enquiry into the house. A line of foot-prints in the snow served his purpose."

"But he couldn't bargain on the snow."

"No. I wouldn't mind betting that during the day you will receive some communication which will lead you to search this house. When you do I should apprehend the communicant."

"But what is there to find?"

"This." Inspector Higgins held up the sheet of blotting-paper. "A man cute enough to seize the opportunity afforded by the fallen snow is not going to be fool enough to make such an elementary mistake as leaving behind blotting-paper which he has just used on a letter. We were meant to find this. And to-morrow night the police must be here—we can't help ourselves. It looks to me to be either a double-cross or a frame-up. That's American, but self-explanatory. I'll bet a level quid that whoever turns up to-morrow night is due for a surprise."

"But we can't do anything if anyone *does* turn up, sir."

"I quite realise that. Therefore I say that we haven't yet found all that we were meant to find here."

"Such as . . . ?"

"I really haven't the faintest idea."

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins made the discovery, which was not surprising, for the policeman's uniform was found in the chimney, and the inspector of late seemed to have a penchant for chimneys. Not a complete uniform, but helmet and jacket. In the tail pocket of the jacket was a pocket-book, in which was written: XX 57936. So it was the uniform the man had worn the night before. Very thorough. Had Higgins asked for the notebook there was the number!

And that reminded him . . . it was very funny that he should have forgotton . . . that number ought to be broadcast to the police with instructions to apprehend. . . . He called the sergeant to him and gave the necessary order. The man looked at him queerly . . . must keep this book . . . fingerprints . . . and the smashed car round the corner . . . he'd forgotten about that too. . . .

Inspector Higgins collapsed, an inert heap upon the floor of the cottage.

. . . . . .

"Got the constitution of a rhinoceros! . . . Slight concussion. Probably a day's rest will set him on his feet again."

Inspector Higgins opened his eyes to find a kindly gentleman leaning over him. Near by was the sergeant, sitting on a white chair, looking exceedingly uncomfortable and twiddling his helmet round and round on the tips of his fingers. A buxom nurse on the other side of the bed. And something cool and soothing on his head. He thought at first, romantically, that it was the nurse's hand, but discovered it to be a lump of ice.

He smiled. It seemed to be catching, for the gentleman, then the nurse, then, rather sheepishly, the sergeant, followed suit.

"All right, Sergeant, we'll leave him to your tender mercies," said the kindly gentleman, obviously a doctor, beckoning to the nurse. The pair retired, and the sergeant cast at the inspector a look of such reproach that Higgins frowned.

"You might 'a told me, sir, how bad you was."

The frown vanished, and a smile took its place.

"I didn't know, else I might 'a done. Many thanks for bringing me here. Now then, Sergeant, there's one or two things I'd like you to do for me."

"At your service, sir."

"Thanks again. Let me see now. Ah, yes. That number —the car registration number, you know——"

"Circulated, sir."

"Good. And the smashed car—you found that, I suppose?"

"Lumme, sir. So that was it—was it?"

"It was."

"It's just been reported, sir. We couldn't find a—er—body or anything, sir. We naturally wondered——"

"It was me all right, Sergeant. I wish you'd do me a favour and tell the superintendent of the —— Fire Brigade about it. Break it to him gently. He may have a few words

to say on the matter, but tell him to send his bill in to Scotland Yard."

"Very good, sir. Anything else?"

"Yes. The brigade was called to a fire last night—a big house just outside Medhurst village. Please see that there is a police guard placed over the house until I can look it over. I'll be along to-morrow."

"I'm sure I hope so, sir," said the sergeant, doubtfully.

"Then there was a boy found on the roof, whom they may have taken into custody. He's all right, but I'd like to see him before he's released."

"Yes, sir."

"And—oh, yes! To-morrow night. I should like to be at the cottage in case anyone should turn up."

"Yessir. We've had the other communication which you said we might receive."

"You've got the messenger?"

"No, sir. It came second-hand. It was a note pushed in the letter-box of our local rag, sir. They passed it on to us. Here it is."

Inspector Higgins took a typewritten slip from the hand of the sergeant.

To the Editor.

Sir,

It is a public scandal that members of the Police Force of this town should use the empty cottage near the Park Gate as a dormitory when supposed to be on duty. I dare you to publish this statement.

Pro Bono Publico.

"Good old Pro Bono—the standby of the anonymous letter-writer. Of course, the writer guessed that the letter would be handed on to you. Safer than delivering it to you direct."

"Yessir. Specially as we're open all night."

"Will you attend to all that?"

"Of course, sir. Er—I hope you'll soon be up and about again."

Inspector Higgins smiled his thanks, turned over on his side, and a moment later was sleeping peacefully, worn out in mind and body.

. . . . . .

It was late evening when the sergeant returned. Inspector Higgins was sitting up in bed, smoking his pipe and reading the morning's paper. He felt considerably better, and had been promised by the doctor that he should be allowed to leave the following morning.

The sergeant tiptoed into the room, and Higgins laid down his paper.

"Well, Sergeant?"

"I've carried out your instructions, sir. They've placed a guard over the big house. In fact they'd already done so on the instructions of the Fire Brigade Super. Something to do with incendiarism, I think. The owners had sloped."

"I knew that."

"An' so has the kid."

"Young Hamper?"

"Dunno his name, sir, but it's the chap they rescued off the roof."

"Gone, eh? H'm." This was remarkable, unless the boy had something to hide. Was he still hankering after his melodramatic revenge? Higgins had taken rather a fancy to Tommy, possibly occasioned by their recent adventure together, and he sincerely hoped that the youngster was up to no mischief. He'd have to place young Tommy in clink or somewhere out of harm's way until the matter was settled.

"And the Fire Brigade Superintendent? I hope you broke his loss gently. I think I warned you he might have a few words to say on the matter. Let's have a verabatim report this time. I'm old enough—and, I hope, well enough—to stand his language. In any case, I'm always

willing to learn. Fire away." Inspector Higgins leaned back reflectively upon his pillow, closed his eyes and placed the tips of his fingers together in an attitude of pontifical benignity.

The sergeant tittered, then: "He said: 'Dear me!' sir."

"Followed by—?"

" 'Well, I never did in all my life!' "

"Good Lord! He didn't finish up with 'Ora pro nobis' by any chance?"

"No, sir"—stolidly.

" 'Kiss me, Hardy'?"

"Me name ain't Hardy, either, sir—it's Johnson."

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH SOME FINGERPRINTS ARE RECOGNISED

A WAVE of repulsion swept over Inspector Higgins as he once more surveyed the fireplace in the library of the big house. It was black with fallen soot, as were the bindings of the books of the library. The late occupier must have got much more than he bargained for when he threw the petrol on the blaze. Such an act must have been occasioned by a vein of vicious cruelty, which for the moment had over-ridden his common sense. It had been his undoing, for without the resultant blaze of light from the top of the chimney the fire brigades would never have been summoned, and the quartet would never have been obliged to make a bolt.

Quartet? Yes, that was right. Soapy, Sanderson, the driver of the car, and the leader of the gang—the man with the evil voice. Four of them, all crooks.

The library contained ample evidence of their recent flight. A section of the book-shelves was found to be movable, for in their precipitation they had failed to re-fasten it securely, and it had opened on hinges like a door. Behind this section was a safe door flush with the wall, which had been opened by a representative of the makers, and revealed batches of papers but nothing of monetary value.

Inspector Higgins removed the papers and placed them on the table preparatory to going through them for possible clues. Underneath the table he found his cap—and was duly thankful.

He seated himself at the desk, then cupped his hands and blew into them. Gosh! But it was damned cold!

The first batch consisted of a bundle of letters. Higgins slipped off the rubber band, and glanced quickly through at the superscription on the envelopes. There were twenty letters in all, twelve of which were addressed to different people. He opened the first, the envelope of which read:

Mrs. Editha Blackman,
High Street,
Holyworth.

The letter began: *My darling.* Hastily Higgins turned to the end. *Your lover, Denis.*

"Tripe!" was his unspoken comment.

He turned to the next, and was surprised to find it was in similar strain. Reflectively he gazed at the ceiling, then slowly nodded his head as if in mental agreement with himself. He uttered one word.

"Blackmail."

Then he scowled. Of all the loathsome creatures which invest this earth, the blackmailer, in his opinion, was the most detestable, and the hardest to catch. This was easy of explanation. The very reluctance of his victims to prosecute afforded the blackmailer his greatest protection. It is easy to moralise. It is easy to understand a faithless husband or a foolish wife. It is more difficult to comprehend an indiscreet letter—yet lovers are notoriously imprudent. That there was a good market for such letters, generally obtained by dishonest servants, Inspector Higgins was well aware. And then, the crowning folly, the initial payment to ensure silence. If people would only realise that the blackmailer had an insatiable maw—that the first payment was but the fore-runner of many! How many lives had been ruined in this way! How many suicides could be laid at the blackmailer's door.

Inspector Higgins clenched his fist. "Why the hell don't the poor fools come to us?" he muttered, through his teeth. "We're human. We won't give 'em away."

Yet he knew, in his heart, that this was more easily said than done. A belated sense of shame kept them quiet, and a forlorn hope that perhaps the blackmailer was at last satisfied. "Lord! What fools these mortals be!"

"So that's his lay, is it? I'll get him now or—or bust!"

There was a knock at the library door. In response to the inspector's invitation a man appeared, armed with a camera.

"Can I operate in here, sir? I've been over the other rooms, and got a few photos. There should be a tidy few fingerprints here."

"Certainly. And whilst you're at it"—he felt in his pocket and produced the notebook taken from the uniform found in the cottage—"you might give this the once-over for prints."

"Very good, sir." The man pulled his overcoat more firmly round his throat. "Mighty cold in here, sir. Why don't you go in the next room—there's a fire laid there?"

"Good idea. I think I will." He gathered up his papers and proceeded to the next room, which was much smaller. He pulled out a box of matches and dropped on one knee to light the fire. He was just about to set light to the paper in the fireplace when he was struck by its distinctive colour. He frowned, then dragged it from beneath its covering of wood and coal. It was a financial paper, dated a month before, and he gazed at it reflectively. Now where had he——?

"Got it!" A sheet of the same newspaper had served as packing for the large hat found in the room of the late Henry Hamper. Thoughtfully he re-laid the fire, struck another match, and lit it. "I wonder," he muttered. "I wonder."

. . . . . .

A file of newspaper cuttings was duly inspected, most of which seemed to have been culled from the "Deaths" columns of sundry newspapers, whilst others came from "Recent Wills." Higgins was surprised at this, but coming

across the name of Mrs. Editha Blackman he guessed their significance. No wonder the pile of letters had been left behind, for their original owners were dead, and the usefulness of the letters had ceased. They were probably kept merely in case some relative of the deceased might be induced to purchase them and thus save scandal.

Higgins gazed first at the letters, then at the fire he had recently ignited and which was now going strongly. He picked up the bundle and thrust it into the thick of the flames.

"If only their original recipients had had the sense to do likewise," he reflected, cynically, "they would have saved themselves a hell of a lot of trouble."

. . . . . .

"I've finished now, sir."

It was the photographer from Scotland Yard, who had called in to see whether the inspector had any further instructions.

"Good. Get Sergeant Mercier to look them over and tell him to let me know if any of them have passed through our hands. There's a telephone here, isn't there? Right. Tell him to ring me up here if he's got anything to say. I shall be here all day, and may stay the night."

"Very good, sir."

. . . . . .

Three other things of more or less importance were found in or around the big house, all of which gave some small aid to Inspector Higgins in his investigation.

The first was a contract note from a firm of stockbrokers relating to a purchase of some bonds to bearer for a Mr. Robinson. The note was found tucked in the middle of a bundle of tradesmen's receipts, and had obviously been placed there by mistake. Higgins made a note of the address of the stockbrokers, and decided to call on them at the first opportunity to get further particulars of the transaction. He did not think for one moment that they

could supply any useful information, but was merely following out his usual policy—thoroughly to investigate any clue, however slender.

The second was the discovery in a large shed of a number of rifles and a target. This discovery set his mind at rest on a minor point which had been worrying him: During the "battle" of the library, why had not the sounds of the shots caused enquiry at the village? The answer was now obvious—they were used to such sounds from the range in the shed.

The third was a few inches of rubber tubing found in the ashes of the furnace fire used to drive the dynamo for the electric lighting of the house.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins was gratefully imbibing a cup of tea brewed for him by one of the guards of the big house, when the telephone bell rang. Hastily draining the cup he hurried to the instrument.

"Hallo! Are you Medhurst One Three?"

"I—er—I—er— Yes," added Higgins in desperation, after an unsuccessful inspection of the instrument to ascertain the number.

"London wants you."

A period of splutterings and ear-splitting noises, then:

"Inspector Higgins, please?"

"Speaking."

"Oh. Is that you, sir?" (The inspector sighed wearily.) "Mercier speaking this end. I've tabulated those finger-prints of the house, sir."

"Good. Fire away!"

"About half-a-dozen of 'em belong to 'Soapy' Sudd, sir."

"I guessed that."

"Then there's a few of 'Samson' Sanderson."

"Oh! Has he passed through our hands, then?"

"No, sir. The print came from New York under our

scheme of exchange. Which scheme also accounts for one of the other prints, that of Jacob Heckenstein, a notorious American car-thief."

"Ah! That would be the driver."

"Pardon, sir?"

"Nothing, Mercier. Anything else?"

"Then there are one or two prints similiar to that found on the doorknob of 79, Horton Road, that empty house on the X 87 route, which I can't trace."

"Good Lord!"

"Then there were four prints left. One lot are yours, I think, sir."

"Most probably."

"Then one lot of a small or young man."

"Young Thomas Hamper's, most likely."

"Thank you, sir. I'll make a note of that."

"And the others?"

"One lot belongs to that man found shot on top of the bus, whom you have indentified as being named Raymond."

"Ah! We're getting warm."

"And the other lot were made by that suicide person—Henry Hamper."

Inspector Higgins thoughtfully replaced the receiver on its hook. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH A CAR IS FOUND

THE inspector returned to town by the first train the following morning, and was outside Messrs. Hildebrand and Sons' Gents' Emporium at least ten minutes before the shop was opened. An effusively polite shop-walker bowed him into the manager's room. Higgins placed a paper bag on the desk of that gentleman, and extracted a hat.

"One of your hats, sir?"

The manager inspected it, and agreed.

"I want to trace its owner."

"My dear sir, we sell—er—thousands of that style and make."

"And do you sell—er—thousands of that size?"

"H'm. Seven and a quarter, eh? Large headed. And what's this?" Shudderingly, with the tips of his forefinger and thumb, he extracted from the hatband the strip of financial newspaper which had served as packing. He frowned his distaste—such treatment of a hat seemingly amounted almost to sacrilege in his opinion.

"Must have been bought second-hand, Inspector. We shouldn't do a thing like that. If a hat is not perfect in fit, such adjustment as is necessary is accomplished by means of narrow strips of black felt, not—no, decisively not—with a piece of newspaper."

"Is that your invariable procedure?"

"Always, sir, at this branch—and every other London branch, I should say."

"And your country branches?"

The manager shrugged his shoulders, as though dis-

owning responsibility. "Our country cousins, sir, are apt to be somewhat less exacting in the fit of their—er—headgear, than we of London, I regret to say."

Inspector Higgins was silent for a moment, then:

"Er—have you a branch at Medhurst?"

"High Street. Number seventy-seven."

"Thank you very much indeed."

The manager courteously offered to send the hat to Scotland Yard, and Higgins gratefully accepted.

His next call was to a large building in a turning off Throgmorton Street. A brass plate announced that these were the offices of Messrs. Davis & Camperdown, Stockbrokers. Neither Mr. Davis nor Mr. Camperdown had yet put in an appearance, but the chief clerk placed himself at the inspector's disposal.

"One of your contract notes?"

"Yessir."

"I'd like some particulars of your client."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I'm afraid that our client's business is strictly confidential, and I have no—er—my responsibility—er— Thank goodness! Here's Mr. Davis."

A tall gentleman in silk hat, frock coat, striped trousers, white spats and patent boots, carrying lemon-coloured gloves and an immaculately-furled umbrella, breezed into the office with a beaming smile. The chief clerk hurried over and held a whispered consultation, as a result of which Higgins was shown into the private office of the resplendent person.

"Yes, Inspector. We've had a number of commissions to execute for Mr. Robinson. I've never seen the gentleman, but he always sends cash in advance for all purchases and we send him the securities in due course. As a matter of fact we've got a small credit in his name as a result of his overpayment of some previous commission. It's hard to gauge the exact sum required when bonds of a round figure are purchased."

"How does he communicate with you?"

"By letter. He stipulated for international bonds—bearer bonds—of world-wide negotiability, and fought shy of registered stocks. In fact—"

"Might I see the correspondence, please?"

"Certainly."

A touch of a bell was answered with amazing promptitude, and a few seconds later Mr. Davis had placed in the inspector's hands the file of Mr. Robinson. There was only one letter from Mr. Robinson, and the other documents consisted of duplicates of the bought notes and letters enclosing the bonds, and receipts signed on Mr. Robinson's behalf.

The letter read as follows:

Messrs. Davis & Camperdown, Stockbrokers,
1 Horse Street,
Poplar.

Dear Sirs,

I am enclosing herewith £500 in notes for the purchase of bearer bonds easily negotiable, as I may have to raise money hurriedly in the future. I leave the choice to you, but suggest debentures. They must be bearer securities, not common or defferred stocks,

Yours faithfully,
T. Robinson.

To the inspector's vision but one word of the whole letter stood out, and that was wrongly spelled.

. . . . . .

1, Horse Street, Poplar, proved to be an accommodation address.

. . . . . .

After lunch Inspector Higgins returned to Scotland Yard, and, seated at his desk, reviewed the position.

It seemed fairly patent now that the mysterious "voice" was the leader of a gang, of which both the man murdered on the bus-top and Henry Hamper had recently been

members. If not members they had recently had dealings with the gang. And both had died unnatural deaths.

The man on the bus-top, recognised by the village constable as named Raymond, had been shot from a house on the route of the X 87 bus, and the thumbprint of the mysterious leader had been found in such a house. Circumstantial, but—

Henry Hamper, officially a suicide, had died from coal-gas poisoning, but not in his room at Birkenhead Mansions, and in the ashes of the furnace at the big house was found a small piece of rubber tubing. And coal-gas was laid on at the big house. Very flimsy, but—

The inspector whilst chasing the gang's car had been wilfully misdirected by a man in a constable's uniform, and such a man had helped home Henry Hamper on that Sunday night.

Raymond had been shot in the back of the neck, and there was a rifle range adjoining the big house.

Curiouser and curiouser.

And "deferred" mis-spelled on two occasions.

The reason for Mr. Robinson's aversion to other than bearer securities was fairly apparent. In fact his reason given was indubitably true, for it was exceedingly likely that at this present moment he was endeavouring "to raise money hurriedly." Inspector Higgins reached for his telephone in a hurry himself, and promptly proceeded to put a spoke in *that* wheel, for he caused a request to be sent to the Stock Exchange Committee black-listing sundry bonds of certain distinctive numbers. Not that he could hope to stop any dealings in such numbers but that he might thereby trace the members of the gang. This accomplished he settled himself once more comfortably in his chair.

He was immediately interrupted by the advent of Sergeant Mercier, who held in his hand the notebook found in the cottage.

"Nothing doing here, sir."

Of course not! Now Higgins came to think of it, the bogus constable had been wearing gloves.

"I've sent, as instructed, an all-stations call for the apprehension of Sudd, Sanderson and Heckenstein, sir, with official photographs. We ought to get them fairly quickly. I imagine, from his description, that Sanderson is a bit too big to hide. And a bit of luck's come our way at last, sir."

"That's very cheering," responded the inspector, dryly.

"Yessir. We've got your car, sir."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Higgins well knew Sergeant Mercier's penchant for hanging out a story, and sometimes it irritated him beyond measure. Sergeant Mercier opened the notebook and read out therefrom:

"XX 57936."

"You have?" said Higgins, interested at last. "Where?"

"Outside Moorgate Station."

"Any arrests?"

"One."

"Who?"

"Bobby Bunter."

. . . . . .

It was half an hour later, and Inspector Higgins was being conducted to the cell in which Bobby Bunter was being temporarily incarcerated. He was not there in a strictly official capacity, but by courtesy of the City Police who are without the jurisdiction of Scotland Yard. He and Bobby had met before—officially.

"Hallo, Bobby!"

"Hallo, Cuthbert, old son! Here we are again!" The prisoner grinned at Higgins with engaging and imprudent good-humour. He was about the same age as the inspector, but looked younger. Crime sat easily upon his shoulders, for he had no moral consciousness, neither had he any

shame for his misdeeds. He took the ups and downs of life philosophically—as he took anything else upon which he could with safety lay his hands.

There was a silence whilst Inspector Higgins quizzically surveyed the prisoner, who did not seem to mind this inspection one whit, for eventually he remarked, smilingly:

"And have I altered much?"

"Bobby, you're incorrigible. Yet, you know, I'm damned sorry for you."

"Come off it, Cuthbert, old scout. Drop the heavy!"

"I mean it. It's not like you to get mixed up with a crowd like this."

For one brief second the mask of humour fell from Bunter's face, then:

"Don't fish, Cuthbert. Don't fish!" A pause, then: "How long have we been—er—acquainted?"

"A long while now, Bobby."

The other considered for a moment before he continued: "Yes. It was in nineteen twelve, I think, when you copped me for pinchin' a bike, wasn't it?"

"Something like that. Why?"

"Have you ever known me to be mixed up with *any* crowd?"

"No, I can't say that I have. You always played a lone hand, Bobby."

"Then why the pity? Why think I've broken a life-long rule?"

"Merely—er—fishing, Bobby."

"Well, you're very frank, I must say. And, by the way, I'd like to congratulate you. Never before, in all my vast experience, have I been arrested so quickly upon the perpetration of the—ah—crime. I've generally given you a run for your money, but—congrats, old man, hearty congrats!"

Inspector Higgins remained silent, because he could obtain more information from so doing than from intimate questioning to which the replies would without

doubt be untruthful. The other continued, with plaintive air:

"There was the car, outside the Mansions, simply *asking* to be taken. I felt an urge, Cuthbert, me boy, a powerful urge. And, woe is me, I fell." A prodigious, hypocritical sigh.

Higgins shook his head sadly from side to side as he watched the other's exhibition.

"Bobby, what a magnificent humbug you are!"

"Aren't I? Yet, you know, people ought to be equally responsible who leave their cars unattended, and thus lead 'such a destined wretch as I' into temptation." He stopped for a moment, then: "Quotation from Cowper —or Goldsmith—or somebody or other."

"So it was left outside the Mansions, eh?"

"Yes. Unattended, with the engine running. Now I ask you, as man to man—"

"What Mansions?" queried the inspector, casually. In fact his question was a little too casual, for Bobby became instantly on the alert.

"Hallo-allo-allo. So we don't know what Mansions, eh? There's a black man amongst the firewood." An explanation seemed to dawn upon him. "Do you mean to tell me that the car I lifted belonged to a—er—brother professional?"

"Something like that, Bobby."

"Gosh! I'm sorry. I *reelly* am. My impetuosity has placed his liberty in jeopardy. I may have spoiled his getaway. So that's why he left the engine running. Even now he may be running round with a sackful of swag and nowhere to put it. Gosh!"

He relapsed into silence as though the mental picture he had conjured up was too much for him. Higgins waited for a moment, then he asked again, casually:

"What Mansions did you say, Bobby?"

Bunter merely looked at him, shaking his head, negatively:

"Nothing doing, Cuthbert. After all, *noblesse oblige*—live and let live—honour amongst—ahem!—and—er—what not!"

Inspector Higgins moved a little closer to the prisoner, then lowered his voice.

"Bobby. Do you think we might come to some—er—arrangement?"

"Cuthbert, you pain me beyond expression. I—I thought you were different somehow." There was a glint of steel in his eyes as he gazed at the inspector. "Higgins, what money I may have I'll keep. I've never purchased my freedom yet and—"

"D'y'think I want your filthy money?" interrupted Higgins in a loud voice.

"Sorry. My mistake. You want information, eh?"

"Yes"—eagerly.

"And he's known me since before the War," remarked Bobby, to the world in general.

"So there's nothing doing, eh?"

"Bull's-eye!"

"Ah, well. It's a great pity. To think that once again you must languish in durance vile."

"And it was only last Tuesday that I had my hair waved."

Inspector Higgins left the cell, and immediately sought out the superintendent of the police station. A hurried consultation, and then a few minutes later a sergeant called upon Bobby with the intimation that he was free to go.

"That's very kind of you. But pray enlighten me as to the reason for your change of front."

"It's like this Mr. Bunter"—Bobby smirked at the prefix. "We understand that the car might have been loaned to you by its owner. At any rate, we have had no intimation that it has been stolen, and therefore there is no question of prosecution."

"You're quite right. The car was loaned to me. Give a

dog a bad name—you know the rest. I suppose I can have the car back?"

"Certainly, sir. With our compliments and apologies."

Bobby Bunter passed through the swing door of the police station and down the half a dozen steps with a magnificent swagger, and entered the car. Nonchalantly he lit a cigarette, pulled on his gloves, stepped on the self-starter, and let in the clutch. With old-world grace he raised his hat to the uniformed constable on duty outside the station, and received a dignified salute in return.

With an impudent wave of his hand, he was gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN WHICH A MAN IS CAPTURED

BOBBY BUNTER set off at a quick pace. Moorgate, Newgate Street, Holborn, Strand, Marble Arch, Edgware Road, and then turned to the left. Within twenty minutes of his release he drew into the kerb outside a block of flats. He opened the door and stepped out, leaving the engine running. Then he sounded the klaxon horn vigorously. Having accomplished this he walked away, whistling. He had acted according to his lights. Having robbed a "brother professional" of his car he had done his best to return it.

It was unfortunate that he should run into Inspector Higgins as he was turning the corner. He guessed the significance of the meeting at once.

"Blast you, Higgins! You trapped me into this!"

"Sorry, Bobby," responded the inspector, apologetically. "But needs must . . ."

Bunter seemed immediately to recover his good-humour.

"Cuthbert, me boy," he said, admiringly, "if I had your brains I could make a success of my profession!"

"Bobby, old man, if you had any brains at all you'd never be in it." The inspector snapped his fingers, and a man came running up. Higgins pointed to Bobby.

"Cart him off to the cooler. We don't want him giving any alarm."

Higgins watched his departure sombrely. After all, loyalty, however misplaced, covered a magnitude of sinfulness.

. . . . . .

Bobby Bunter would have slept much more soundly

in his cell that night had he but known that the raid on the Mansions was an utter frost.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins arrived at the country cottage about nine o'clock that evening. He had four helpers from the local police station, all in plain clothes, and in charge of the sergeant who had taken him to the hospital and had carried out his instructions the previous day.

The snow, which had been the cause of a great deal of trouble the morning of that day, had since melted, and thus there were no tell-tale footprints that a trap had been set. Higgins, the sergeant and his three underlings, entered the cottage by one of the windows to avoid any warning which a muddied front doorstep might have given.

Then began a tedious wait. The words on the blotting-paper "To-morrow night" might mean anything during the dark hours, which at that time of the year were between five o'clock in the evening till about seven the following morning. Higgins had assumed that the traffic on the road outside would not cease until after ten (at which hour the public-houses officially closed), thus he did not arrange to meet until nine. When, however, the clock of the near-by Town Hall struck midnight and still there were no signs of an intruder, he had grave misgivings that they had arrived on the scene too late.

Unfortunately, smoking was taboo, for the inspector knew from experience how the smell of tobacco would betray a man in hiding. The two bottles of beer brought along by the thoughtful sergeant had long since been emptied. Conversation was carried on in whispers, and there was an uneasiness about the general atmosphere of the place, which is the concomitant of the darkness and the small hours in an empty house.

Higgins gravely wondered whether he had mis-read the message or its purport. In his mind he felt perfectly convinced that someone would turn up at the cottage during

the night. He felt absolutely certain that the message had been left behind for the police to find. The sending of the letter to the local newspaper tended to prove this, and yet . . . Was he not crediting the "voice" with too much ingenuity? Was it not possible that the main and dominant intention of the message on the blotting-paper was to get Inspector Higgins out of the way whilst some other deviltry was carried out elsewhere? That was, indeed, a most comforting thought—I don't think! . . .

"Ssh!" Five men hissed the warning, and Higgins smiled into the darkness. They had all heard it, and each had assumed that the other had not. Yes. There it was again. Someone, heavy-footed, was creeping through the slush to the front door.

The instructions were definite. Unless the intruder, whoever he was, made any attempt to bolt, he was to be allowed the entire freedom of the house until he should discover that he was not alone. The watchers were to endeavour to remain hidden until they received a signal from the inspector. These instructions were occasioned by a further alternative to the inspector's reasoning: that the message might be genuine, and the note to the local rag merely a coincidence—in which case the words "Meet me" indicated that there would be more than one intruder during the night.

There was the sound of fumbling at the front door, which was pushed open. As soon as the man had closed the front door he dropped all attempts at secrecy. Higgins could imagine him stretching up with thankfulness that he had effected an entry without arousing enquiry. Through a crack in the door Inspector Higgins tried to make out who the man was, but it was much too dark. His progress up the stairs, however, was made perfectly simple to follow by reason of the glow of an electric torch with which the man guided his footsteps.

He entered the room opposite that in which the inspector was hidden, and walked without hesitation to the fire-

place, where from his muttered imprecations it was obvious that he had failed to find that for which he searched.

Then, for some reason, the man seemed to scent a trap, for with a snarl he released the button of his torch, plunging the place into darkness, and charged for the door. Higgins was taken by surprise, but dashed into the darkness to intercept him.

Of the inevitable collision Inspector Higgins came off second best. He was flung to the ground by the force of the impact, but managed to grab a foot as the man was dashing past. There was a crash which shook the cottage to its very foundations, then utter pandemonium.

A tangled mass of threshing arms and legs, a howl as a hand or foot came into violent contact with tender flesh, and the language . . .

The intruder at last succumbed to *force majeure*. He had put up a gallant fight, and even now it was as much as the three constables could do to hold him still.

"Let's have a little light on the subject, Sergeant," gasped Higgins, sobbing for breath.

Immediately the sergeant pressed the button of his torch and directed the resultant ray of light upon the prisoner's face.

It was "Samson" Sanderson.

"*You'd* never make a cat-burglar, Sanderson."

"Go to hell!"

Of a sudden the man's belligerency faded. His shoulders slumped, his chin sagged to his breast.

"So the swine squeaked, eh? Sent me here to retrieve the uniform, whilst . . . God!" He uttered a short harsh laugh, devoid of humour. "All right, Higgins I'll go along quietly. But I'll get even with the swine! I'll tell all I know! No, I can't do that, I . . ."

Sanderson made one last despairing effort to shake off his captors, and then was handcuffed to two of the constables.

"Shall we wait until the car calls in the morning, sir, or shall we push off now?" queried the sergeant.

"The moon's up again, so we may as well make a start. There won't be any more visitors to-night."

"Righto, sir. Come along boys."

The free constable opened the front door and his two confrères passed through with their prisoner, followed by the sergeant and Inspector Higgins. The other constable closed the door and brought up the rear.

There was a flash from behind the hedge further down the road, the report of a gun, and the mighty Sanderson sagged to his knees, then fell headlong, dragging the manacled constables in his wake.

. . . . . .

"The bullet-wound is not the most of his troubles, inspector. If you'll pardon the interference, I should say that he had been badly manhandled before he was shot."

"He was"—shortly.

"But he'll recover all right; may take some time, of course, but . . ." The kindly doctor, the same one who had attended Higgins a short time before, shrugged his shoulders expressively. "And—no questions, yet. He may be the biggest criminal unhung, but to me he is a human being, and, as such, I forbid any questions yet awhile."

"All right, Doctor. You're in charge here."

"Any signs of his assailant?"

"None whatever. Much too dark at the time."

"I suppose he'll get away with it"—with friendly malice.

"I wonder. Do you know, Doctor, that were I to be given one hundred and forty-seven guesses as to who was the culprit, my first would be correct."

"Then you know who it is?"—unbelievingly, fully conscious of his inability to dodge a leg-pull.

"No," said the inspector, slowly. "I don't actually

know who fired the shot, but, on occasions, I'm a damned good guesser."

With which cryptic statement, Inspector Higgins, with a nodded adieu, left the hospital.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS VISITS A SHOP

INSPECTOR HIGGINS returned once more to London, and immediately set on foot enquiries which he should have set in motion before. He asked Sergeant Mercier to ascertain the registered owner of the motor-car numbered XX 57936.

The car itself had been removed from the block of flats, after the abortive raid thereon, to Scotland Yard, and there had been examined by experts. It was not nearly so innocuous as at first glance it seemed. For one thing, it was capable of a terrific speed, much greater than the make and the build of the car suggested. Then, under the cushions of the back seat was a box which was found to contain a miniature armoury, with a vast quantity of ammunition. Then the tool box contained, beside the tools, several passports, which were subsequently found to be forged.

The licence, encased in the bonnet near the windscreen, was in perfect order, and did not expire for another six months.

Inspector Higgins blessed Bobby Bunter for removing at a critical moment the gang's means of escape. Without a car and the passports they were practically immobile. When under the floor-boards was found a quantity of money in various currencies, Higgins was still more jubilant.

He guessed that the car was kept in the condition it was found as a means for a quick getaway, such as that made from the big house upon the arrival of the fire-brigade. Money, passports and guns, all in readiness. And to think that Bobby—Higgins chuckled his appreciation.

He realised, of course, that the money found had probably nothing to do with that taken from the safe just prior to their flight, and that for the moment the gang was undoubtedly in funds. Yet a time must surely come when the liquid cash would run out, and the gang be obliged to turn some of their possessions into currency. When that time arrived, they must undoubtedly leave behind some clue.

Higgins was fully convinced that it was only a matter of time before "Soapy" and Jacob Heckenstein were captured. The police were in possession of full descriptions of these two and had photographs which had been circulated. With regard to the leader, whom Higgins, for want of a better appellation always referred to in his thoughts as the "voice," the Force was badly handicapped. There was no photograph available—just a thumbprint. This print was becoming indelibly impressed upon the inspector's memory. He had been able to give a general description as to the man's build, from the occasion when he had met the man disguised as a policeman, yet such general discription would fit eighty per cent. of the male population, and, for all practical purposes, was useless. The voice too, was hard to describe. Higgins was sure that, were he ever to hear it again, he would recognise it. Yet the man seemed also to be aware of this, and on the one occasion Higgins had spoken to him and heard his voice in reply, he had failed to recognise it owing to its disguise.

Pretty hopeless—unless the depredations of the gang broke out afresh.

Meanwhile there were other clues which called for investigation, and it was in response to one of these that Inspector Higgins made a further journey to Birkenhead Mansions.

Inspector Higgins had been giving the Hamper case a good deal of thought, and he had come to definite conclusions. The Sunday night when Henry Hamper had

been brought home ostensibly drunk, but in reality (according to the inspector's theory) dead, three men had been involved—the policeman and the large man who had carried Hamper up to his room, and the driver of the cab. In the light of subsequent events it seemed reasonable to suppose that the large man was the wounded Sanderson and the driver of the cab Jacob Heckenstein. Who then was the policeman? One of two people—either the man Raymond who was shot shortly afterwards whilst taking that mysterious ride on top of the bus, or the "voice." Considering that the latter had on a subsequent occasion donned a policeman's uniform, it was quite on the cards that on that Sunday evening it was the "voice" again. It was, however, fairly easy of proof.

Mrs. Hick, the landlady of the upper portion of Birkenhead Mansions, had become an important witness. She alone had seen the pair of helpers on that Sunday night.

Thus Inspector Higgins had come for this interview armed with two photographs. One of Sanderson and the other of the man Raymond. He was convinced that she would recognise the large man. If she failed to recognise the photograph of Raymond, then the man in policeman's uniform on that night must have been the "voice."

Therefore Mrs. Hick was the only person outside the gang who had wittingly seen the mysterious leader. The significance of this reasoning struck the inspector's consciousness like a knock-out blow. Mrs. Hick . . . The *only* person . . .

And the "voice" himself must be equally cognisant of this startling fact.

Inspector Higgins stopped short—then set off again at a run.

A single thumbprint was a slender clue—but the existence of a person who could recognise the leader without recourse to that or the sound of his evil voice . . .

Only lately had there been any activity on the case since

the closure of the inquest. The leader would know this and . . .

Mrs. Hick was in grave peril.

Higgins ran to a telephone booth, and breathlessly asked for the number of the police station which covered the Birkenhead Mansions area. A moment later he was connected with the superintendent.

A brief explanation, then once more Inspector Higgins was on his way, but at a more leisured speed. The superintendent, should he act with despatch, would be at the Mansions some twenty minutes before Higgins could arrive.

When Higgins did arrive he was at least a couple of hours too late. Mrs. Hick had gone.

. . . . . .

Despondently he returned to the Yard to discover from Sergeant Mercier that XX 57936 was owned, according to the records, by one Thomas Hamper.

"Thomas? Are you sure?"

"Positive, sir."

"That may mean nothing—or it may mean a great deal."

"Quite, sir," responded Mercier, dutifully, but Higgins was too pre-occupied to take any exception to this remark, for which the sergeant was duly thankful.

. . . . . .

The disappearance of Mrs. Hick might or might not be connected with the case. Inspector Higgins felt that he could well leave this portion of his investigations in the capable hands of the superintendent of the local police station. Yet, if it were purely coincidental, it was nevertheless a darned nuisance.

He wanted someone to identify Sanderson, or to connect him in some way with Birkenhead Mansions. Ah, yes! The hat. A visit to the Medhurst branch of Messrs. Hildebrand and Sons' Gents Emporium seemed to be indicated, and he might at the same time pay a visit to the

hospital to see whether he would yet be allowed to interrogate Sanderson.

The man on his arrest had been wearing a cap, but Higgins had overlooked the fact that an inspection of the maker's name inside might be of assistance to him.

. . . . . .

"Yes, sir. We certainly sell a fair number."

"To anyone at the big house?"

"Possibly, sir. We're a cash business, so we rarely get to know the names of our customers."

"This is quite an outsize. Does that help?"

"Seven and a quarter. Yes, sir. As a matter of fact it does. When the gentleman called we hadn't a hat large enough in stock, but we immediately sent to our head office for one. He called back later for it. It was slightly too large even then, but he wanted it in a hurry, so took it without adjustment."

"Ah!" The sheet of financial newspaper. Higgins felt in his pocket and extracted an official photograph of "Samson" Sanderson. He flourished this at the assistant. "This the guy?"

"That's the gentleman, sir"—reprovingly.

"Thanks." This was very satisfactory—very satisfactory indeed. "Perhaps after you have knocked off this evening you'll be good enough to step over to the hospital and see whether you recognise the original of this"—replacing the photograph in his pocket.

"Certainly. It's on my way home."

"It's not your local hospital, I'm afraid, but I'll send a conveyance. You'll enjoy the ride."

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins, having ascertained that the assistant left off at seven o'clock, decided that he would fill in the time of waiting in trying to find someone who could give a description of the leader of the gang. Some tradesman or other, perhaps. It was a very wearisome job. The "voice" seemed to have a mysterious faculty of keeping

out of people's way. Many had seen Sanderson, and Soapy. In fact, the late Raymond had been identified by the photograph recognised by the constable. Other members of the village were questioned, as was the postman. Nothing doing! Higgins came regretfully to the conclusion that as far as being seen and recognised was concerned, the "voice" did not exist.

. . . . . .

"That's my customer all right, sir, the one who bought that bowler hat from us. And now I've seen him, sir, I'm reminded that he bought a cap from us fairly recently."

"He did, eh? Remember the date?"

"No, sir. But I can look up our stock records and let you know."

"Do. 'Phone me at Scotland Yard."

. . . . . .

"I've extracted the bullet, Inspector, and have got it for you in my surgery." It was the kindly doctor speaking after he had forbidden Higgins to question Sanderson for a few days.

"Thank you, Doctor. If you'll get it for me . . ."

Three minutes later Inspector Higgins was inspecting the bullet which reposed in his palm. He was considerably shocked when it was given to him, for it seemed to dispose fairly effectively of a pet theory he had formulated.

The bullet was an exact replica of that extracted from the foot of the man who was murdered on top of the X 87 omnibus.

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH A YOUNG LADY IS ANXIOUS

A YOUNG lady to see you, sir. She's been before, and she—er—seems to be in great distress, sir, if you'll excuse my mentioning it."

"Well. Who is she?"—shortly.

"A Miss Crawford."

"Ah, yes. Show her up, please."

Now what did Tommy's girl, Miss Jill Crawford, want? And in great distress, eh? H'm. So Tommy had not yet turned up. And Miss Jill would probably accuse him of having had a hand in young Hamper's disappearance. Ah, well! It was all in the day's work. Though why the devil . . .

"Ah! Good morning, Miss Crawford. This is indeed a pleasure!"

Inspector Higgins had been prepared for some evidence of recent tears, and had conjured up a beaming smile preparatory to an effort to cheer the girl up, but immediately he saw the child's haggard face and pinched appearance, the smile faded as though by magic, and a concerned expression took its place. The girl looked positively ill, and the inspector at once jumped up from his chair and conducted Miss Crawford gently to the seat opposite to his desk.

"And have we breakfasted this morning?" he enquired:

Dumbly she shook her head, and Higgins forthwith pressed a bell upon his desk.

"Rolls, butter—and tea. Lots of tea." He nodded his dismissal to the messenger who had answered his bell, but immediately ran to the door to call out: "And bring two cups, please!"

"Not a word, my dear, until you've—er—fed."

In a very short space of time the messenger returned laden with a tray upon which was an enormous pot of tea, two cups and saucers, some hot rolls, butter and marmalade. Over his arm was a table napkin, which he proceeded to spread on the inspector's desk in a space which that officer had thoughtfully cleared.

He solemnly laid the table, then tactfully retired, his whole demeanour advertising that he considered he had a wonderfully scandalous tale with which to regale his colleagues about "old Higgins."

"Shall you pour out or shall I?" A question quietly asked, which however served its purpose of setting the girl at her ease.

There was a silence whilst Miss Crawford hungrily devoured the food, and the inspector thoughtfully sipped at his cup, covertly watching the girl. At last she thrust the plate aside wth a sigh of satisfaction. Higgins took up his cue.

"Well, my dear?"

Again a hint of tears, instantly suppressed. "I—I've lost my Tommy."

"That young man always seems to be getting lost, my dear. But why come to me?"

She gazed at him in complete surprise. "I've nowhere else to go," she replied, naïvely.

"No friends?"

She shook her head, dumbly, and the inspector felt a surge of pity. The poor kid seemed so forlorn.

"Now then, Miss Crawford. Let me ask you a few questions. I must tell you, in the first place, that I haven't the faintest idea where Tommy is, but if you answer my questions perhaps I can form some sort of notion. Now then"—he leaned forward impressively—"you haven't yet told me how you came to look for young Tommy in that empty house."

"That's where I saw him last. It was about nine o'clock

on the evening before we found him that we were walking past the house, when Tommy suddenly said he'd go inside as he'd seen someone go in a few moments before."

"Why did he want to go in?"

"Because he thought he recognised the man as someone connected with his father."

"Did you see the man go in?"

"N—no, sir."

"H'm. And you think Tommy was locked in that upper room all night?"

"Of course. He *said* so"—with wide-eyed faith. "He was out all night."

"And you haven't seen him since we found him?"

"No—no, sir."

"Where d'y' think he's got to?"

"I dunno, sir. He—he's been so funny since his father died."

"In what way?"

"He's sworn all sorts of vengeance to the men he thinks responsible. He told me that one had already got it in the neck and that——"

The girl broke off, and sat with her mouth wide open as though petrified, conscious that she might have said too much. Then: "I—I don't think I'd better say any more."

"Why not, me dear? If he's really innocent of any harm, the truth cannot hurt him."

"I—I know, but . . ."

"Do I look the sort of man who'd hound an innocent chap to prison?" Inspector Higgins spread out his hands in a gesture of appeal and the girl surveyed him gravely.

"No—no, you don't. You've a nice, kind face."

Inspector Higgins blushed to the roots of his hair, not so much at the compliment, as at the choice of words. On a previous occasion similar words had been used in connection with the inspector's face. It was some few years

back, and he had been interrogating a criminal, and had made a similar appeal, which had been unsuccessful. As a matter of fact, the interview had terminated on a somewhat strained note, for the criminal had finished with: "Yus. You've a nice kind face—I don't think." Since then, the phrase had been anathema to him.

"Well, then. What are you afraid of?"

The girl remained silent.

"Ah, I see now! You're not too sure that he *is* innocent, eh? H'm. That's a nuisance. So he said that one of the men responsible for his father's death had already got it in the neck?"—ruminatively.

"Y—yes, sir."

"I—er—suppose he meant the man on top of the bus. He certainly got it—literally—in the neck."

"I suppose so—n-no, no, no! He didn't mean him."

"How d'y' know?"

"He only used the usual phrase. 'Got it in the neck' . . . meaning . . . meaning . . ."

"Oh, I know what its colloquial meaning is, all right, Miss, but when did he tell you this?"

"Why, when—when . . ."

"When you saw him last, eh?"

"Yes"—eagerly.

"So the last time you saw him, he told you that one of them had—er—got it in the neck, eh?"

"That's right, sir."

"And you've seen nothing of young Tommy since you left him with me after he had hurt his arm in that empty house?"

"That's so, sir."

"You're telling me the truth, I hope, Miss Crawford?"

"Of course. I'll swear it, if you like"—head thrust back, in an attitude of high indignation. Higgins stared at the girl for a moment, then shook his head from side to side.

"I shouldn't do that," he commented, dryly.

"I'm quite prepared to, if it's necessary. You said yourself just now that the truth harmed no one."

"Listen, my dear," said the inspector, quietly. "One of the men whom Tommy thinks—rightly or wrongly—responsible for his father's death, was the man called Raymond, who was shot whilst on top of the bus."

"My Tommy didn't do that—he told me Raymond was dead—but . . ."

"Quite!" Inspector Higgins's voice was deadly serious. "And how did he know?"

"I dunno, sir. Read it in the papers—or something."

"You said just now that you hadn't seen Tommy since we found him in that house. I know that when we found him I left you together for a few odd moments, when he might have told you a few things, but he didn't tell you about Raymond then."

The girl considered this for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

"That's when he told me."

"Don't be a damned idiot."

The girl was badly shocked, and stared at the inspector with frightened eyes.

"It must have been then—f-for I haven't seen . . ." She stopped, her eyes wide-opened as she realised the import of her denial, then with a pathetic moan she slipped off the chair and sank to the floor.

. . . . . .

"Gosh! I hope the papers never get hold of this," reflected Higgins, grimly, as the matron of the sick-bay, with a baneful look in his direction, gently led the girl away.

He wished to goodness that he had never turned up at the Yard that morning, for then the girl would not have seen him, but there was such a lot of general routine business accumulated since his absence on the case, that he

had thought it expedient to give up a morning in an effort to wipe off some of the arrears . . . and this was the result!

And now to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, the truth from the lies. If Jill Crawford persisted in her story that young Hamper had told her of the death of Raymond whilst in that room in the attic of 79, Horton Road, then she endangered his life and liberty, if she didn't succeed in placing a rope round his neck. For Hamper, under his own statement, had spent thirty hours in that room, and during that thirty hours Raymond had been shot, possibly from the very house in which Hamper was found. Then Higgins remembered the finding of the key of the room of the area, and his suspicions that Hamper himself might have thrown it there from the skylight of the attic.

Was it possible that after all Raymond had been shot by young Hamper? Had the boy's revenge started with that crime? Yet why stay in the house afterwards? Had he returned for something—some clue or other—which he hoped to redeem? Was the arrival of the inspector at the house so unexpected and inopportune that the boy had to bolt to the attic, and, once there, conceived the idea of locking the door on the inside and throwing the key out of the skylight in order to bolster up his story that he had been locked in the room all the day? Was he quick-witted enough for such an action?

The girl's movements since she had called at Scotland Yard to give Higgins his change from the pound he had given her for taxi-fare were known.

Higgins groaned. She couldn't have seen Tommy since! There was one ray of light. She might have seen the boy during the night after he had been sent home, and before the two constables turned up in the morning to discover that he had gone. He remembered that Constable Jones, whom he had first instructed to shadow the girl after she

had left the yard, reported that she had been looking for someone. Or perhaps Tommy had written. Gosh! Higgins hoped so.

Hamper had vanished after the fire. Higgins could have sworn that he was no murderer, yet . . .

Yet, if Hamper had returned to redeem something he had overlooked he certainly hadn't found it in that house. And the "voice" had also turned up at the house whilst Higgins had been there, for his thumbprint ("That damned thumbprint!") had been found on the doorknob. Why? Perhaps *he* had left something behind, which *he* certainly hadn't had time to find before the two constables made so effective an entrance. Higgins rubbed the back of his head thoughtfully.

And Jill Crawford had said that she had remained hidden upstairs, afraid to move since that other man had followed him in. And that other man had been the "voice"! So Jill Crawford had seen the "voice"—and so had Mrs. Hick! . . .

Still, it had been dark at the time, and . . . The "voice" hadn't known that Jill Crawford had been in the house at all! . . .

Thank God for that, anyway!

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH A GENTLEMAN VISITS SCOTLAND YARD

INSPECTOR HIGGINS initialled the last of the accumulated correspondence, and with a sigh of thankfulness settled himself more comfortably in his chair. At last he was free once more to give the case his undivided attention. He opened a drawer of his desk, and extracted therefrom the sundry photographs of the thumbprint of the leader of the gang. He studied it with malevolent gaze—it was, indeed, becoming indelibly impressed upon his memory. Hitherto, to him, all fingerprints looked alike (for such matters were outside his department), but he really felt that were he to see this print again he would immediately recognise it.

From the various copies of the print obtained, a special photograph had been built up by the Yard experts, which gave a complete print as it should appear if the "voice" voluntarily gave it.

This, then, was the only clue as to the man's identity. The inspector ordered several copies of the print to be made, and for these copies to be circulated to the various capitals of the world, in the forlorn hope that further information might thereby be forthcoming.

There was a timid knock at his door, and Higgins replaced the prints in the drawer before giving any invitation to enter.

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"What's he want?"

"Dunno, sir. He says it's something to do with the Raymond murder, sir, so I thought you would like to see him."

"What's he like?"

The man considered for a moment before replying, then: "Er—medium sized, sir. Wearing a trilby hat—a—a—brown hat, sir. And—overcoat. Ordinary sort of suit, sir. In—fact, sir, he's an ordinary sort of looking cove altogether, sir."

"A very helpful description." A pause. "What's his voice like?"

"'Usky, sir. 'Usky."

"Oh, it is, is it? H'm. All right. Show him up, but—er—don't leave us alone until I give you leave. Understand?"

"Yessir."

Inspector Higgins once more opened a drawer of his desk, but this time he pulled out a wicked-looking revolver, which he examined carefully before he placed it in his jacket pocket. This might or might not be the "voice" (whom the inspector credited with unlimited nerve) but in any case Higgins was taking no chances.

A moment later the man was shown into the room, whilst the messenger stood stolidly by near the door. One look was sufficient. The man was weak-chinned, nervous and bordering upon mental collapse. Higgins waved him to a seat, then turned to the messenger.

"All right."

The man retired, leaving the newcomer seated nervously upon the very edge of his chair, twiddling his trilby hat and gazing abstractedly all round the room—anywhere save at the inspector's face.

"Well, sir?"

The man gave a start at being addressed, and licked his lips in a harassed manner.

"Er—er—are you in charge of the bus murder, sir?" The words came with a rush, the hoarseness of the voice being due to emotion.

"Yes. Higgins is my name—Inspector. What do you want?"—sternly, for the inspector had some small expe-

rience in dealing with such characters. The man swallowed, then made a valiant effort to pull himself together.

"I—I understand that—er—you have been looking for me, sir."

Higgins frowned, and stared anew at the man. He couldn't place him. "Who are you?" he asked abruptly. The man felt in his pocket and produced a card which he handed to the inspector.

HENRY ADAMS,
Mount Helen,
Hampstead.

"Well, Mr. Adams, if you'll kindly come to the point . . ."

"I—I was on the bus that night the man was murdered." The words came with a rush, and Inspector Higgins drew a breath of astonishment. So this was the second fare! This was the man whom the conductor thought looked either frightened or angry. Angry? Higgins could have laughed! Yet he had turned up voluntarily. True, numberless enquiries had been made without result, yet the fact that he was here now, of his own volition, was a point in his favour.

"I see, Mr. Adams. So you were the gentleman who got on the bus at the Fox and Hounds, Horton, and, after going to the top deck, almost immediately retraced your steps and alighted from the bus."

"That's right, sir."

"Well, of course, you know, I'm bound to warn you to think well before making any statement to us, in case such statement should redound to your own—er—confusion. In other words—be careful what you say as we may have to take action against you."

"Oh, dear! I sincerely hope you won't. I've come to you because the man's dead—and—and—I'm damned glad he is." The last words were uttered with such vindictiveness

that Higgins revised his opinion as to the possibility of him having been angry on leaving the bus. He tried to help the man out.

"Look here, Mr. Adams. I think I can see your difficulty. You know something which, were the man alive, you would hesitate to say, but that now he's dead you would like to tell us."

"That's right, sir, but . . ."

"What's your trouble?"

"Well—er . . ."—hesitant, undecided.

"Ah! Will it help you if I say that we know the man to have been a blackmailer?" Not exactly the truth, perhaps, but—

"I see. Well, sir, I *do* know something of the man, much to my sorrow, but I can only tell you if you promise me that you'll say nothing about my—er—indiscretion."

"My dear Mr. Adams," said Higgins, patiently, "I can promise nothing. If your indiscretion, as you term it, is criminal—then you'll have to take your chance; and, if you'll excuse my saying so, that chance you've already taken by calling at Scotland Yard. If it's a moral—er—indiscretion—then it's nothing to do with us. That's a question between you and your conscience."

"It's not criminal, I assure you, but—you see—my wife . . ."

"Don't worry about that, sir. Provided it's nothing to do with the case, you've nothing to fear from us."

"Very well then, I must take your word for it. I saw the man Raymond that night, and paid him one hundred pounds in notes."

"Why?"

"To keep him quiet about something"—ashamedly.

"Why not tell me all about it, Mr. Adams? Really, though I say it meself, I'm the soul of discretion. Besides, it'll do you good to get it off your chest."

The story was quickly told. Mr. Adams had, after sev-

eral years of married life, gone off the rails a bit. Nothing unmoral, but he had written some foolish letters to a lady in which he posed as a bachelor. These had got into the hands of the gang, and Mr. Adams had been paying ever since for silence. Higgins gathered that Mrs. Adams was a bit of a tartar, and heartily sympathised with the unfortunate victim. Adams was pestered with demands, always for amounts which he could just about afford to pay, which proved the extent of the gang's knowledge of its victim's affairs. Each demand was accompanied with definite instructions as to how payment should be made.

On the occasion in question, Adams was told to catch the last bus on the X 87 route at the Fox and Goose. If there was a man on the top deck with a rose in his buttonhole he was to leave the hundred pounds on the seat in front and withdraw. This he did.

"Why the blazes didn't you come to us in the first place?"

The man stared ashamedly at the floor, but made no reply. Higgins guessed the reason. Then:

"Did you recognise the man?"

"No. I hadn't seen him before. Previously I've had to send the money by registered post. Thank God it's all over now!"

"Why?"

"The man's dead, isn't he?"

"That's nothing"—brutally. "There were half a dozen in the gang."

"D-do you think they'll be after me again?"

"Sure to"—cheerfully. "Then you must communicate with me, and we'll nab him. Here, I say! Pull yourself together!" Higgins jumped from his seat in alarm, for the fact that his troubles had not closed with Raymond's death seemed to be almost too much for the man. He paled, and gripped the arms of his chair. The inspector rang a bell on his desk. . . .

. . . . . .

The faintest of knocks, and, without waiting for any invitation, the door of Inspector Higgins's room was warily opened, and a head peeped in. It was Dr. Pape.

"Say, Higgins, what's the game? That's the second person from this room whom I've treated downstairs. Are you practising a new form of third degree or something? Two in half an hour is a bit of a record."

"And if you don't clear off, Doc," stated the voice from the desk, "you'll make the third . . . or I will. This case is driving me barmy."

"Impossible!" With a chuckle, the police surgeon proceeded on his way.

. . . . . .

This yarn of Mr. Adams's did little to clear up the case —it merely helped to prove what the inspector already suspected. The hundred pounds exactly, found upon the murdered Raymond, had seemed to point to blackmail as soon as Higgins had discovered the nature of the gang's activities. Where, however, the man's story did help was in the fact that his instructions had been given him beforehand. Therefore, Raymond's journey on top of the last bus must have been known to other members of the gang, and was not a question of coincidence. This had, hitherto, been the chink in the armour of the inspector's reasoning, this question of coincidence. From the bus-men he had ascertained that on sundry occasions Raymond had caught the last bus on the X 87 route and other routes. Whoever had shot Raymond had surely not relied upon chance that the man would catch this bus on the night in question. He would wish to be certain. Unless, of course, he had infinite patience, and watched each night for the last bus to go by on the off-chance that Raymond would be travelling by it. That sounded absurd. Yet murderers did do abnormal things. A strong motive might give patience to an otherwise impetuous man. Such a motive, say, as revenge. . . . Revenge . . . young Hamper!

Was Thomas Hamper mixed up with the gang? After

all—what chance had the kid had in life? A criminal father, whose parental authority and example were worse than none at all. The kid had been compelled to earn his own living from a very early age. No harm in that, of course, but . . . And that car registered in the name of Thomas Hamper. Nothing in that, perhaps—the elder Hamper being one of the gang. Might be merely a mistake. And how the devil had young Hamper turned up so opportunely at the big house, just when things were getting so uncomfortable with the mighty Sanderson?

"I'll find the kid and wring the truth from him somehow."

Yet, since their ordeal together in the chimney and on the roof of the big house outside Medhurst, Inspector Higgins had had a warm corner in his heart for the youth.

"Oh, Lord!" A sigh which was half a prayer.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN WHICH A SEARCH IS MADE

"A LETTER for you, sir. Just come."

"Thanks." Higgins took the proffered missive, absent-mindedly slit the envelope, and withdrew a sheet of paper.

——— *Hospital.*
November 3rd, 19—.

Dear Mr. Higgins,

My patient, Sanderson, is now much recovered, and this morning he expressed a wish to see you. I do not forbid an interview, but wish to reiterate the fact that he is still my patient.

Sincerely yours,
Harold English
Resident Surgeon.

Detective Inspector Cuthbert Higgins,
*Scotland Yard, S.W.*1.

"I wonder," muttered Higgins. "I wonder."

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins did not take immediate advantage of the doctor's offer. Whatever Sanderson would have to say would keep, for he was pretty certain that the man, now on the road to recovery, would not say anything likely to incriminate himself. Had he spoken when he was first captured, when the first rage at his betrayal was guiding his tongue, something useful might have been given away, but now . . . No. Sanderson was too wily a bird to cut off his beak to spite his face. Yet Higgins must be careful not to give him too much time to concoct his story and elab-

orate any details thereof. Whatever Sanderson said must be gone into, and, if possible, corroborated from an outside source.

. . . . . .

Once more Inspector Higgins was back at 79, Horton Road, the house condemned by the authorities as unfit for human habitation, and in which a uniformed policeman had been living since Higgins had given instructions for a guard to be set on the place.

He had promised himself at the time that he would go over this house with a fine toothcomb, but he had delegated this duty to others, and had not yet had the time to go over the place himself.

After his reasoning a short while back that either Thomas Hamper or the mysterious "voice" had called at the house to redeem some clue previously left behind, he had felt compelled to find the time thoroughly to search the place himself.

The constable on duty at the time of the inspector's return had seemed half asleep, but had become considerably agitated on learning the identity of his visitor.

The front door was still screwed into position, and the constable had made himself comfortable in the room outside the door of which Higgins, on his first visit, had tripped over the wooden ball.

The inspector's first discovery was a half-consumed bottle of beer, for which the constable was at a complete loss to account. This was most unlucky, for the inspector, with an inward chuckle, decided that, there being no apparent owner he might as well confiscate it—and did so, internally. The constable watched him, in silence, sympathetically licking his lips.

"I had a thirst, Constable, which I wouldn't have sold for a quid," said Higgins. "Otherwise I'd have offered you some."

"I'm a tee-totaller, sir," responded the man, unctuously.

Inspector Higgins raised his eyes to Heaven, but said

nothing. He turned his mind to more serious matters. Where was the most likely place to find that mysterious clue which either Thomas Hamper or the "voice" had left behind?

Let's take Tommy first. If he were the culprit, then the clue might be anywhere in the house, from the basement upwards, for, if his reasoning were correct, then Tommy had bolted to the attic without redeeming the clue; or, alternatively, if he had done so, then he must have re-hidden it before taking flight to the attic. In that case, why hadn't the previous searchers found it? To find a secure hiding-place whilst in the hurry of desperation was seemingly impossible, yet Tommy must have done so.

And what about the other? It was fairly obvious that the "voice" had not secured the clue prior to the time that the inspector had heard him mounting the stairs, because there would have been no need for him to ascend any higher after finding that for which he had returned. Therefore the clue, whatever it was, must have been left on or above the first floor. Was it possible that, before the arrival of the two constables, and after he had turned the handle of the door of the room in which the inspector was hiding, that the "voice" had recovered the clue?

And why had he started to enter that front room? Gosh! That must have been the very room in which the clue was hidden!

"I should have thought of that before," muttered Higgins, administering a mental reprimand to himself.

"Pardon, sir?"

"Merely expressing my thoughts aloud, Constable."

Inspector Higgins ran up the rickety stairs as quickly as their dilapidation would allow, after instructing the constable to remain below. He entered the room and once more gazed around it.

Again he decided that the man Raymond could easily have been shot from the window. Even as he looked through its broken panes a bus numbered X 87 passed

by in the street below, and, remembering young Hamper's feat in the big house, guessed that he could have hit any of the passengers with a piece of coal. Young Hamper. Why did he always think of the youth in connection with this murder?

The deal table, since the police search, was even more unstable than before, whilst one of the two backless chairs was now minus a leg, and leaned drunkenly against the wall. Higgins wondered how on earth that additional damage had been suffered, and what the searcher had expected to find in the broken leg. The empty whisky-bottle had escaped damage.

The floor-boards showed unmistakable signs of having been recently disturbed, and it was apparent that the search had been fairly thorough.

Then the inspector's eye fell upon the fireplace, and his mind at once reverted to the chimney, for it was in a similar hiding-place that the uniform had been found in the vacant cottage. The chimney!

Higgins had a slight distaste for chimneys since his escapade in the big house at Medhurst—and he had already spoiled much clothing under the stern call of duty! Of a sudden he remembered the "total abstainer" down below! The man deserved something for telling such a patent lie. Higgins walked to the top of the stairs.

"Constable, come up here a moment, please!"

"Coming, sir."

"Ah, Constable. Were you present when this room was searched?"

"Yes, sir. I did it myself"—proudly.

"And you looked up the chimney, I have no doubt."

"Er—yessir."

"Good. Well, have another look."

The constable gave his inspector a quick glance, then stepped to the chimney and stared gingerly upwards. Then he inserted a tentative arm, and cautiously explored the ledges above the bars. Suddenly there was a shower of

soot and the constable precipitately retired, spluttering.

"So you didn't look, eh?" remarked Higgins as he surveyed the heap of soot.

"I—I thought I did, sir."

"H'm. Well, it doesn't matter. There's nothing there."

For it was fairly obvious that, were anything to have been hidden up the chimney, there must have been signs of fallen soot when he had first inspected the room, and Higgins had no such recollection.

"You had the floor-boards up, I see."

"Yessir. They weren't much trouble. The whole place seems to be tumbling to pieces."

"What about the walls?"

Inspector Higgins walked round the room, carefully tapping the walls, listening for some tell-tale sound which would reveal some hidden recess. He had a half-hope of finding a secret cupboard—the house was old enough for such a phenomenon at all events!

Then he turned the table over on its side, and looked underneath the top, in the forlorn hope that the simplest of hiding-places might have been overlooked. Again without result.

Higgins retired into the centre of the room, and from there slowly surveyed the floor, ceiling and walls of the room. Bare and battered. Aged and decayed. Even the skirting-boards were coming away from the walls.

The skirting-boards.

He walked round the room, tugging at each separate portion. At last a piece about a yard long readily came away in his hands.

In the space behind was a small rifle.

Higgins inserted his hand, whilst the constable stared with the blankest of expressions on his countenance.

It was a sports rifle, the bore showing unmistakable signs that it had not been cleaned since the last shot had been fired. And there were no fingerprints. Higgins dusted

the entire weapon with fine powder, but with no result. After its use, it had obviously been rubbed over with an oily rag. A further search behind the skirting-board revealed the oily rag, and a small oil-can.

"Which accounts for the basement door being oiled."

"Yessir," responded the constable dutifully, although he had not the faintest idea of what the inspector was talking, and although Higgins had addressed the remark more to himself than to the other.

"Now then, Constable. How did you come to miss this?"

"I—I could have sworn I looked behind the floor-edging, sir. I can't think how it could have escaped my notice, sir."

"Well anyhow—it did!"—dryly.

"Unless, sir, it was put there after we searched."

Inspector Higgins was silent for a moment. He hazarded a guess that this was merely said to excuse, yet it had its possibilities.

"Someone's been on guard here all the time?"

"Yessir."

"Then how could this have been put there without your knowledge? It's bulky to hide, in any case. That's why it was left here. Guns like this take some concealing, Constable."

"Yessir."

The man's ready acquiescence to his every suggestion was getting on the inspector's nerves, and his parrot-like "Yessir" did not tend to dam the flood of the inspector's rising wrath.

"Look here, Constable. You've told me quite enough lies for the present. Did you, or did you not look behind that skirting-board?"

"I—I had the floor-boards up, sir," the man hedged, almost in despair.

"Damnation, man! Gimme a straight answer!"

"I—I—er—thought——"
"Did you or did you not?" shouted Higgins.
"N-no, sir."
"Thank you. You may go."

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN WHICH SANDERSON OFFERS AN EXPLANATION

THE inspector's temper was still somewhat ruffled when he left the house shortly afterwards for Scotland Yard. He had the gun with him, but for the moment he was mostly concerned with the problem of when rather than how it reached its hiding-place. Was the constable's suggestion that it had been placed there since the search to be discarded because it was highly improbable?

When the "voice" had escaped from the condemned house, upon being discovered by Constables Goldfinch and Smart, he had left by a window. Was it not possible that he had returned by the same route unbeknown to the constable left on guard? Just possible, perhaps. But why return with the gun? At the best it would greatly add to the hazardous mode of entry adopted, and what could be the reason? It seemed contradictory, somehow. Hitherto the inspector had been arguing within himself that the "voice" had returned to recover some incriminating clue left behind when the murder was committed; now he wanted to argue that the man returned to the scene of the crime in order to leave an incriminating weapon behind! Against reason! And the inspector was not certain that this house actually *was* the scene of the crime.

Unless—unless there was something behind it all which at the moment was obscure. . . .

Leaving the weapon at Scotland Yard for the urgent attention of the gun expert, Inspector Higgins set out for the hospital, inwardly wondering what Sanderson would have to say, and whether he would be able to believe the man when he had said it.

"Well, Sanderson, here I am!"

The man, to Higgins's inexperienced eye seemed little the worse for his adventure, but the inspector had been warned before going in, by Dr. English, that Sanderson would not be completely well again for many weeks.

"I'm glad you've come along, Higgins, I've something to tell you."

"In that case I'd better warn you that anything you say . . ."

"Quite. I know the rest. I wouldn't say a word if I hadn't been ruthlessly betrayed by that swine Mapell."

"Mapell. So that's his name, eh?"

So, at long last, the "voice" had acquired a name. Higgins was glad at this information, for the name seemed to add substance which had hitherto been missing.

"Yes. Mapell. He sent me to that deserted cottage to retrieve the uniform he'd left there the night before. And—and squeaked to you fellows. You'd never have got me otherwise."

Higgins shrugged his shoulders.

"You never know, Sanderson. You ought to know by now that there's no honour amongst thieves."

The other started, then flushed.

"If I were well, Higgins, I'd—I'd . . ."

"If you were well, I should say exactly the same thing, Sanderson, and you know it."

The other sank back to his pillow. Then he sneered:

"Easy to talk. Even Mapell had to wait until I was handcuffed to two of your slops before he dared put a bullet into me."

"You think it was the—Mapell, then?"

"Who else?"

Inspector Higgins did not reply, merely contenting himself with hunching his shoulders and spreading out the palms of his hands.

"Go on."

"I'm going to turn King's Evidence, Higgins."

"Oh, you are!" The inspector's voice did not sound any too pleased. He had a certain code of honour in all his dealings with criminals, and the informer or similar type he treated with ahhorrence. He had, of course, to act on the information which he obtained from such sources, but, at best, it was a dirty business. It might save him weeks of labour, might even supply some missing link without which he could not complete a case, yet, in spite of all this, he would ten times rather do without the information. It was an unwritten commandment. Thou shalt not sneak. According to Higgins, the man who, in order to save his own neck, turned on his pals, had reached the lowest rung of humanity. That was why he had such a brotherly feeling, almost amounting to affection, for Bobby Bunter. Bunter was a car-thief, and as such a menace to civilisation, yet . . .

"All right then, Sanderson. I'll call a police stenographer. I brought one along in case."

Inspector Higgins walked to the door, whilst Sanderson, with a smirk, brushed back his hair. The stenographer entered, nearly six feet of him, and Sanderson once more relapsed upon his pillow.

"Fire away"—disgustedly from Higgins.

"What d'y' want to know? I'll answer all the questions I can."

"First of all: regarding the supposed suicide of Henry Hamper."

"Supposed?"

"You heard me."

"H'm. There's no harm in telling you that—er—I mean—er. . ."

"Go on"—shortly. "I know what you mean."

"Well, then. As a matter of fact—he *did* commit suicide——"

Inspector Higgins snorted with impatience. What on earth did the man expect to gain by such an obvious untruth, when he must know—

"Please let me finish, Higgins. Hamper *did* commit suicide—but not at Bulstroade's Buildings."

Ah! This was different!

"Tell it in your own way, Sanderson."

"I intend to"—with veiled insolence. "Hamper killed himself at our big house at Medhurst. He did it by means of a piece of rubber tubing attached to a gas-bracket. Raymond and Mapell found him on the Sunday morning. He was stone-dead. We all got in an awful panic about it. You see"—with a wry smile—"we didn't want to invite police enquiries at Medhurst. We had a pretty hectic ten minutes after we discovered Hamper's body, I can tell you. We'd have to report it, or dispose of the body somehow. We got ready to bolt, when Mapell had a brain-wave. We knew that Hamper had a room at Bulstroade's Buildings, and that the gas was laid on there. If we could only get the body into that room we might be able to fake matters so that it would look as if he had actually committed suicide there. No harm in that, was there? Under the circs?"

Inspector Higgins did not answer, but motioned the other to proceed.

"We got out the car——"

"Not a taxi?"

"No. We got out the car, and Mapell and I lifted Hamper's body into it. Mapell giving his celebrated impersonation of a more humble member of your profession, my dear Inspector—"

"Quite."

"Heckenstein drove us to the Buildings, and the journey from the big house passed uneventfully. Hamper's landlady let us in, and we carted him up to his room."

"You don't happen to know where the landlady is now, I suppose?" queried Higgins, casually.

"Haven't the faintest. But to resume. We got the—er—deceased into his room and lit the gas. Then we packed

the window-frame with some newspapers we'd brought for the purpose, and arranged Hamper artistically in the pillow-case. We were just about to turn out the gas in order to connect the piece of tubing we'd brought with us when it went out of its own accord. I dunno how Mapell felt about it, but it put years on me. Anyhow, we'd anticipated working on the tubing without gas-light—naturally, and so we lit the piece of candle we'd brought with us."

"Oh, yes." Inspector Higgins spoke abstractedly. He had forgotten that piece of candle stuck in its own grease upon the table, and had not realised that it had any special significance.

"We fixed up everything comfortably, then we had another shock. We hadn't a copper between us with which to replenish the meter. This seemed to me to be the last straw, but when Mapell suddenly remembered that we had left Hamper's hat behind—well, it nearly finished me. I had to leave mine in the end—we put a sheet of paper in it, left over from stuffing the windows, to make it smaller. But even then it must have been miles too big. Still, it was the best we could do."

"Didn't strike you, I suppose, that the man Hamper, being ostensibly drunk, could reasonably have been expected to have lost it during the course of his pub-crawl?"

"Lord, that never struck me, Higgins! I needn't really have left it at all."

Sanderson was silent for a moment, then: "Yes. I was a fool. I didn't mind much at the time—the hat was always a bit too big for me, but . . . Anyway, we pushed off back, after Mapell had locked the door from the outside with a pair of pincers. That was an inspiration on his part, although we had the pincers with us in case there was any trouble in fixing up the gas-bracket. On the way back we were worried about the gas. How much was there in it? If Hamper were found too soon with no smell of

gas, we were done for. Then we thought of sending that letter to try and bolster up the idea. Mapell wrote it. He was always good at—er—er——"

"Forgery?"

"Mapell wrote it," continued Sanderson, ignoring the inspector's suggestion, "and we sent Raymond back to post it in the nearest pillarbox. We thought it undesirable to be seen there again ourselves. That's all."

"And what happened to Raymond after that? Who killed him, eh?"

"Not me."

"Who was it then?"

"I dunno."

"H'm. And why d'y' think Mapell gave you away?"

"My size"—bitterly. "I'm too big. Easy to identify. He was afraid that they'd find him through me."

"Well, shall we?"—quizzically.

"No. I don't know where he is now, curse it, else you would."

There was a silence which lasted fully three minutes, during which time the pair gazed at each other speculatively, whilst the burly stenographer sat mutely by. At last Higgins walked to the door, and there he stopped.

"So, Sanderson. Taking you by and—yes, certainly large—taking you by and large, you're really mother's little white-haired boy."

"Your simile, Higgins, is singularly apt."

"H'm."

On which note of scepticism the interview terminated.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN WHICH A BURGLARY IS COMMITTED

"TYPE it out and make a carbon copy. Then take it in to Sanderson—the original only, not the copy—and read it over to him, and get him to sign it."

"Very good, sir."

"Of course, he may refuse, or in a moment of exuberation or remorse or something, may tear the thing up. You can make a half-hearted attempt, if you like, to stop him, but you can let him in the end. He may feel better for it. Of course, you must keep the copy—that'll come in useful." After which Machiavellian instructions Higgins nodded dismissal.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins left the hospital after bidding adieu to the doctor and nurse and thanking them once again for their kind ministrations after his accident with the car, and set off for Scotland Yard. When he was at last ensconced in the corner seat of a third-class smoking carriage, he once more reviewed the statement of Sanderson. Again he was engaged in an endeavour to separate the wheat from the chaff.

He reprimanded himself for two things. His failure to realise that the piece of candle had any special significance, and his failure to compare the newspaper in the windows with the sheet found in the hat. If they turned out to be from the same issue, then it was a clue which should not have been overlooked. With relief he remembered that the paper which had been stuffed in the windows had been destroyed or removed before he had

given the case his undivided attention. That mistake belonged to Constable Summers, who had first had charge of the police investigations. Anyhow, this would be a lesson to Higgins. He would consider twice before he sent an inexperienced officer alone on a case, however simple it seemed at first blush.

Now this statement.

So Henry Hamper had committed suicide after all! But had he? Was Sanderson telling the truth? Reason suggested the answer to be in the affirmative. It was such a rational explanation.

Higgins could well understand the gang's anxiety to avoid close contact with the police. If Hamper had really committed suicide in the big house it must have been a tremendous shock to the other inmates—not so much at his death, for they were a pretty tough crowd, but at the jeopardy in which the situation placed them. Here was a body. The explanation was reasonable. The police would investigate the death, and no one would be blamed. Yet—the very presence of the police was a source of danger to every inmate of that big house. Anyone there might have been recognised—enquiries must follow—it might have led to them all being recognised—the police would ask awkward questions—then clink for the lot! Yes. The body was a problem which they almost succeeded in solving. If the gang hadn't been in such a panic they might have been entirely successful. If!

Yet, from what he had learned of him, the man Mapell did not seem to be one easily upset. Not at all the man likely to lose his head in a crisis. How was it then he had forgotten to take Hamper's hat with him? Surely it was most unlikely that a man who had thought out the entire scheme would have forgotten the hat. True, he might have argued, as the inspector had done, that the loss of a drunken man's hat was understandable, yet . . .

Sanderson himself was probably more easily frightened. Was it not possible that the omission of the hat had been

deliberate? Mapell himself had been in the policeman's garb, ostensibly to add verisimilitude to their actions and frighten away undue civilian curiosity, yet he was thus prevented from leaving behind his own headgear. It had to be Sanderson's. Even Sanderson himself could see the reasonableness of this. Perhaps Mapell intended to get Sanderson into the clutches of the law. Although he had failed then, he had succeeded later in doing so. First Hamper, then Raymond (whether or not Mapell himself was responsible for this), now Sanderson. Next Heckenstein and Soapy. Then Mapell would be free and unfettered with associates who knew too much!

But to return to the death of Henry Hamper. Was Higgins justified in disturbing the coroner's verdict—"Suicide whilst of unsound mind"? According to Sanderson the "Suicide" part of it was quite in order, but there was, as yet, no definite evidence to show the state of the mind. The inspector decided, after mature consideration, that for the moment he would say nothing. Time enough for that when Sanderson's story had been proved—or disproved. He was not entirely satisfied that the large man had given a true version of the facts of Hamper's death.

When Inspector Higgins arrived at Scotland Yard he found amongst his pile of accumulated letters, one which had a bearing upon the matter in hand. It was from an official of the London Stock Exchange.

Dear Sir,

Following upon your letter asking for information with regard to certain bonds, a list of numbers of which you enclosed at the time: if you will send a duly authorised representative and ask for the undersigned at 79b, Throgmorton Road, he will be pleased to place at your disposal some further information which has just come to hand,

Yours faithfully,
Frank Wrigley.

To Detective-Inspector C. Higgins, C.I.D.

The inspector re-read the letter and immediately decided that he, himself, would be his "duly authorised representative." He set out for Throgmorton Road forthwith, and within half an hour was ensconced with Mr. Wrigley at number 79b.

"I take it, Inspector, that there is no question of theft with regard to these bonds—I mean, that the bonds themselves have never been stolen."

"To my knowledge—no."

Mr. Wrigley spread out his hands, and raised his eyebrows in a mute suggestion of interrogation.

"Then you see our difficulty, I am sure. The bonds presumably were bought for cash?"

Inspector Higgins nodded. With all due respect he hoped that Mr. Wrigley would soon come to the point.

"That being so, and the question of theft being ruled out, then the bonds are good delivery to a subsequent purchaser. I'm sure our police authorities would not wish us to pass judgment upon the morals of our clients before we could do business. It would be rather a handicap"—with a grave smile.

"Quite."

"Nevertheless, without necessarily betraying any of our clients' secrets, we are always prepared to render help to the authorities, if perchance it lies in our power."

"And such occasion has arisen, Mr. Wrigley?"

"Yes. Dominion 5 per cent. Bearer Bonds. Numbered 3111898 to 3111907. Fifty pounds each. Ten of them. Sent to a member of the Stock Exchange for disposal. Sold at hundred and one. Net proceeds about five hundred pounds. Instructions to send same in pound notes to an address at Poplar."

"Aha!" The meat at last. "And the address?"

"1, Horse Street, Poplar."

"Gosh. When are the brokers going to forward the money?"

"It's gone already."

"What!"

"You've been a long time answering our letter, Inspector. Naturally we assumed that you had no further interest——"

"But dammit, sir! Your letter only came a few hours ago!"

"I'm sorry—but——"

"Never mind, sir. I must be off. Thank you very much."

Inspector Higgins bolted.

1, Horse Street, Poplar. This was the accommodation address to which the bonds had been sent originally. Why the deuce hadn't the Stock Exchange people waited until they had heard from him? He must have overlooked the letter this morning. . . .

"Have you a letter addressed to Mr. Robinson?" Breathlessly, as soon as he had entered the small stationer's shop, the inspector flung his query at the weary-looking man behind the counter. It was a different person to the one he had seen when he had made the enquiries some short time ago.

The man walked to a drawer, which he opened, then, after a few minutes' delay, he returned to the counter with a package, which he slapped down with a resounding smack.

"There y'are. Shilling ter pay."

Inspector Higgins marvelled that five hundred pounds could be purchased for so small a sum. It seemed incredible.

. . . . . .

The inspector had a short interview with the actual owner of the stationer's shop, and was immediately installed as an assistant to the weary-looking man who had offered him the package a short time ago.

Higgins had been serving behind the counter for but an hour when he no longer wondered at the tired aspect of the other, for a more wearisome job he could not conceive. During the duller moments he wandered round

the shop gazing at the stock, and once again met the flimsy-looking packet containing four sheets of notepaper, four envelopes and a sheet of blotting-paper, with the superscription of: Value! Value!! VALUE!!! He would have been more excited over his discovery had he not learned that such an envelope could be purchased at nearly every shop in London.

It was the most dreary and uneventful day Higgins ever remembered spending. He was bored to distraction, and it was with a sigh of thankfulness that he helped the other put up the shutters at seven o'clock.

He decided to spend the morning there on the off-chance that someone would turn up to claim the package of notes, and that after that he would leave a subordinate to carry on. He would not have spent so much time at the stationer's as he had, only he felt convinced that the gang must be running short of money, and a member might turn up at any moment. He hoped it would be Mapell, not Heckenstein or Soapy.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins certainly visited number one, Horse Street, Poplar, the following morning, but at a much earlier hour than he expected, for it was just six o'clock when he received telephonic intimation that the shop had been broken into during the night, and the packet of notes stolen. Nothing else had been touched, and it was open to question whether or not anything else in the shop had been worthy of the burglar's attention. At any rate, he had touched nothing.

It was the proprietor who had given the alarm. He lived over the shop and had been disturbed about five o'clock by sounds in the shop below. He frankly admitted that he was badly frightened and had made no attempt to give the alarm until the sounds below had ceased. Then he had informed the policeman on his beat, who, in turn, had communicated with his station, and from thence the

information had been passed to Scotland Yard and to Inspector Higgins.

Such fingerprints as had been left behind belonged to Jacob Heckenstein.

This man was known to be an associate of Mapell. Here was a problem. Could a man be arrested for stealing his own property? Higgins gave it up. He'd know what to do if ever he laid hands on either Heckenstein or Mapell!

CHAPTER XXX

IN WHICH A LETTER IS FOUND

THERE was one redeeming feature about the burglary at the stationer's. It afforded a clue as to the whereabouts of the gang. Obviously the remaining members must be in London, and one, at least, had during the last few hours been in Poplar. It seemed as if Mapell must have been pressed for money to sell the bonds in the first place, yet why had not Heckenstein called for the package in a straightforward manner? To the inspector's own experience it was obvious that the letters and the like were handed over without question, provided the fee was paid. It was not to be thought of that the robbery was carried out merely to avoid payment of the shilling fee. That, of course, was ridiculous. Yet why hadn't Heckenstein come along and paid his shilling to recover the notes? Obviously because he was aware of the inspector's presence during the course of the previous day. And who had told him? Or how had he found out without coming into the shop. Of course, someone might have come into the shop first to scout round, merely buying a ball of string or something to make an excuse for entering, yet . . . Had Heckenstein been warned, either by the proprietor or by the weary-looking assistant?

Inspector Higgins decided then and there to look very closely into the *bona fides* of this pair.

He also made another decision. Perhaps Heckenstein had not yet turned over the money to Mapell, in which case it was advisable that he should not do so. For Mapell without money would be much more easily caught than a Mapell with a further five hundred pounds in his pocket.

Inspector Higgins issued the necessary instructions. Then followed swiftly and silently a drive of the various underground criminal haunts known to the Poplar police. Many small fish were caught in the net, but of Mapell, Heckenstein or even Soapy, there was no sign.

Somewhat dispiritedly Higgins returned home, but on his arrival at Scotland Yard the following morning, his drooping spirits were revived by receipt of a letter from New York in response to his letter enclosing a photograph of Mapell's thumbprint.

Not only had the print been traced, but the American police had been able to forward a copy of the man's photograph. The inspector's elation became somewhat subdued when he realised that the photograph was at least twenty years old. Still, it was better than nothing.

The "voice" now had, not only a name, but an old likeness.

The New York police, however, could not give much information about Mapell, for they had seen nothing of him for the twenty years subsequent to the photograph, and such information as they could supply was two decades out of date. Yet even then, Mapell had been mixed up with a gang of blackmailers. The shoemaker sticks to his last!

Armed with this photograph, Inspector Higgins called upon Jill Crawford, who, although entirely unaware of the fact, was kept under close police surveillance and protection.

"Not a bit like him, sir. He's a lot older than that."

"I know, my dear, I know," persisted Higgins patiently. "But this is as he was twenty years ago."

"I'm sorry, but—I'll say it is him if you like."

"Thanks very much"—faintly sarcastic. "But now about young Hamper. Seen him lately?"

"No."

"You don't seem as worried as you did some time ago. You know where he is?"

"No."

"H'm. Well, I'm going to have a look at his lodgings. You can come along if you like—and—er—see fair play."

"All right. I'll come along."

Fetter Street, Camberwell, had been visited by Constable Summers when he had originally called there to break the news to young Hamper of his father's death. Since then the house had been watched by the police after Hamper's disappearance in the hope that the young man would be tempted to return, but so far without success. The boy's actual rooms, however, had not been disturbed, but Higgins had at last decided that the young man's activities must be closely enquired into. Hamper might be concerned with the death of Raymond, and thus duty had overcome disinclination to meddle with the lad's affairs.

Higgins's invitation to Jill Crawford to accompany him was the result of selfish motives. In the first place, it was almost certain that Hamper's landlady had seen Jill, in which case the inspector's investigation might be assisted by that good lady on the strength of his apparent friendship with Miss Crawford. In the second place, Higgins was convinced by this time that Jill was aware of the whereabouts of young Hamper and he hoped to trap her into such an admission.

The landlady was effusive in her welcome of Jill, and the inspector had a moment of self-congratulation. Then began the serious business of a search of the lad's room. Higgins did not know what he expected to find. He was merely hoping for some clue as to where Hamper was in hiding. He fully expected Jill Crawford to betray the boy by some involuntary exclamation or similar means, yet he was not prepared for the cry she emitted when, from behind a drawer, he extracted a letter with a recent postmark.

"Give that to me"—peremptorily.

"My dear young lady!"—in mild reproof from the inspector.

With calm deliberation Higgins studied the handwriting upon the envelope, which was addressed to Mr. Tommy Hamper, and had been re-addressed from various lodging-places until it had reached Fetter Street, Camberwell.

There was a scurry of feet and the next moment the letter was torn from his grasp. The ensuing struggle (if so it can be termed) was most unseemly, yet quite five seconds elapsed before the inspector once more held the letter in his hand.

"A most unladylike proceeding, Miss Crawford," he remarked, gravely.

"Give it to me! Give it to me! It's mine, I tell you! Mine!" Jill Crawford was on the verge of tears, her voice rising in a shrill crescendo.

"What do you mean, my dear? Is it from you to Tommy?"

The girl made no reply, merely nodding affirmatively.

"In that case . . ." Higgins bowed, extending the letter towards her between the thumb and the forefinger of his right hand. The girl said nothing for a moment, then she slowly advanced until she could almost touch the letter. She glanced up into the inspector's eyes, then, ignoring the letter, flung herself into a chair and burst into tears.

"I thought as much," muttered Higgins to himself, smilingly, thrusting the envelope into his jacket pocket. He stepped towards the girl and placed a paternal hand upon her heaving shoulder.

"Never mind, my dear. You did your best."

Then he walked to the door and called the housekeeper, who a moment later came bustling in with outraged demeanour.

To the sounds of endearment and reproach from the region of the chair, Inspector Higgins withdrew the letter from its envelope. Immediately he gave a start of sur-

prise, for the letter was headed "Bulstroade's Buildings," and commenced: "My son."

Bulstroade's Buildings,
London, E.1.
October, 19—.

My son,

Since our meeting the other day, when we had a short talk together, it has been forcibly brought home to me that I haven't been much of a father to you; that, as I was responsible for bringing you into the world, so am I responsible for your upbringing since that date. And I have failed you! I have let you fend for yourself, and have made no attempt to contribute towards your upkeep. Still, knowing from whence my money was obtained—you being such a straight-laced young devil—I very much doubt whether you would have accepted any monetary help from me. Other than monetary help from me would have been worse than useless, my example to you worse than valueless. You know me for what I am—a crook. Yet I know you'll not let this letter fall into the hands of the police—at least, not until I'm dead. It won't matter then. That is my reason for writing this letter. I feel, somehow, that death is close at hand. You'll probably say that, when we had the aforementioned chat, I seemed to be in the best of health—and you would say the truth.

When I say that I feel death to be close at hand I do not mean that I feel ill. No. I feel that a violent death is slowly but surely overtaking me.

The reason is simple of explanation. Since meeting you I have had a revulsion of feeling for the life I have been leading, and from that day I have been endeavouring to run straight. I told you then that I would try, and I am keeping my promise. Unfortunately for the gang with whom I have been associated, I know too much. They cannot afford to let me run straight. For some unaccountable reason they believe that a straight man must of necessity

be a sneak. From the little you know of me at least you are aware that telling tales has never been a failing of mine. In any case I cannot say anything about the others without involving myself; and self-preservation—you know the rest!

I try to bolster up my courage with alchohol. It is not a success. Already I have been threatened by my landlady here that a repetition of insobriety will lead to my eviction. She is new to this place. In the old days the gang used to meet at this address, and when I decided to cut myself adrift I came to Bulstroade's Buildings. I doubt whether Mapell with all his cunning would think of looking for me here—still, you never can tell. I've dodged them so far, but I feel they'll get me in the end. I would go to the police for protection, but what's the good? My record is bad—and I'm no informer. If I should die a violent death you can guess who'll be responsible. The man Raymond is a beast, but I believe Mapell to be worse. I'm mortally afraid of them both. I don't think you know either of them. You will, however, remember Sanderson. I don't know the name he was using when you met him several years ago, but he's a mighty man of stature. He's got a great deal more brawn than brain. With all due deference to his bulk I believe him to be a coward at heart.

Soapy is of different calibre. He's not brave, and knows it. I believe if he had the necessary courage (this in all humility) he'd cut adrift like I'm trying to do.

We have a big house at Medhurst, and I give you my solemn advice to keep away from it. I won't be more explicit as to the site of the house, but, should you ever find yourself in a village of that name (even though it might not be the actual village to which I refer) clear out! You're rather like me in features, Tommy, and they might spot you.

It is very strange, but I believe this to be the only letter I have ever written to you, therefore please excuse its length and the mournful tone of its contents. I am merely

trying to convince you that I really have turned over a new leaf. Should you feel that you can forgive me my past neglect, I shall be delighted to see you at the above address. It isn't much of a place, for I haven't much money.

Perhaps we might even start afresh together in some other country. Please don't tell a soul that you have seen me, as one never can tell.

Your father,
Henry Hamper.

P.S.—Having written the above I've suddenly remembered that I didn't ask you whether you were still living at your old address. I don't know whether or not to send it now.

P.P.S.—I'll chance it. I do hope it reaches you safely.

Inspector Higgins re-read the letter, impressed by its sincerity. Old man Hamper had been a bit of a blackguard, yet seemingly he had tried to start afresh! When Higgins had finished he replaced the letter in its envelope and turned to the landlady, who by this time had succeeded in comforting Jill Crawford.

"Now then, madam. Just a few questions. Do you remember when this letter reached here?"

Before attempting a reply the housekeeper turned to Miss Crawford, her eyebrows raised enquiringly. Jill nodded, hopelessly.

"Yessir. It was the night Tommy Hamper came home with his arm in a sling."

"Young Hamper *had* been out the previous night, I suppose?"—artlessly.

"Oh, yes, sir. He'd never done such a thing before. He was out all that night, and the letter came the following evening. When Tommy came home he read it, and left soon after."

"Why didn't he take it with him?"

"Goodness knows. In the flurry of leaving he mislaid

it, I think. Then he couldn't afford the time to look for it."

"I see. And couldn't Miss Crawford find it?"

"No. We both hunted for it."

"Why?"

"Tommy asked her to, you see. We——" The woman broke off, suddenly aware that she might be saying too much. Higgins turned to the girl, and merely looked at her.

"T-Tommy wrote and asked me to send it on to him."

"Then you know his address."

"No, I don't."

"Then where were you to send it?"

There was a deep silence. Then the inspector walked over to the girl and said, impressively:

"Now look here, my dear. This loyalty of yours to young Tommy is admirable in its way, yet you are fully aware that the police would like to have a few words with him. I'm going to take a chance. Tommy is doubtless in hiding, desperately afraid to show his face in case he is arrested. We shall get him in time—there isn't the slightest doubt about that. Here's my offer. You know where Tommy is. Tell him to call and see me voluntarily, and in return I'll promise to do my very best for him. There's an alternative, of course, but I'm always averse to the use of force."

"I—I'll think about it, Mr. Higgins. Y-you're very kind."

"That's all right, me dear."

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH TOMMY RECEIVES SOME ADVICE

SEATED at his desk at Scotland Yard, Inspector Higgins read for the third time that long letter from Henry Hamper to his son.

So Hamper, if his letter could be believed, was in fear for his life. He was afraid both of Raymond and of Mapell, and Raymond was dead—had, in fact, been murdered shortly afterwards. Apparently young Tommy Hamper had seen his father just before the letter had been written, yet, according to the report on the inquest, Tommy Hamper had denied that he had seen his father recently. Higgins rang the bell at his desk, and asked the messenger who appeared in response to the summons to procure for him Constable Summers's report on the Hamper suicide and the original letter of Henry Hamper sent to Scotland Yard from the Dead-Letter Office.

This letter from Henry Hamper to his son; one word out of the context particularly impressed itself upon the inspector. The word "Deference." Another was "fellow." "With all due deference et cetera I believe the fellow. . . ." "Deference. . . . Fellow."

Henry Hamper seemingly could spell "deference" yet the word "deferred" tangled him up. And there was a difference between "fellers" and "fellow." The note sent on from the Dead-Letter Office must be a forgery. According to Sanderson the man Mapell had written it. Or, alternatively, this letter from Hamper to his son might be an elaborate forgery. Mustn't lose sight of that possibility.

There was a timid knock at his door.

"Come in!"

"Constable Summers's file, sir. And the letter you asked for."

"Thanks."

Eagerly Inspector Higgins took the proffered documents. First of all, he compared the caligraphy of the letter received through the Dead-Letter Office with that recently found in Thomas Hamper's lodgings. The writing was almost identical to the comparatively inexperienced eye of the Inspector, yet, upon examination with a magnifying glass, there were certain minute disparities which might signify that one or the other document was a forgery.

Or both. . . .

Yes. That, too, was a possibility. At any rate, it seemed as if the two letters had not been written by the same hand. That, at least, was something.

Still, "Deference" and "Deffered"; "Fellers" and "Fellow" required some explanation.

Carefully he studied the letter.

To the Metropolitan Police.

I am going to do myself in. You fellers *know me. Henry Hamper. I am sick of it all. I'm sorry for what I've done but not for what I'm going to do. The address is Bulstroade's Buildings. Don't come with a naked light unless you want to meet me in hell now, instead of in a few years time. Our meeting is, however, but* deffered.

H. H.

Then the inspector opened Summers's report on the inquest of Henry Hamper. There was one point which he wanted cleared up. Had young Hamper denied a recent meeting with his father?

Carefully he read the report. Young Hamper had identified his father. . . . Thomas Hamper cannot say definitely that the letter is in his father's handwriting. . . .

No. There was nothing definite. Thomas Hamper, according to the report, had on no occasion denied having recently seen his father. He didn't seem even to have been asked. Might have been, of course, but Summers hadn't reported thereon. H'm. Even if he had been asked he would probably have lied. Old Hamper had requested him to keep mum when they had met, without a doubt.

And young Hamper had met his father between the time Mrs. Hick ("I should like to know where she's got to!") cautioned the old man against coming home drunk and that tragic Sunday. Did that fact help?

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins was not a bit surprised when, the following morning, he received a message that a young man, yclept Thomas Hamper, desired an interview. He had been convinced that Miss Jill Crawford had recently been in communication with the youth, and that his suggestion and promise would in due course be conveyed to Hamper. The only element of surprise was the promptitude with which his offer had been accepted. Obviously Hamper had been hiding close at hand.

On making his offer to the girl, Higgins had sent an all-stations warning that, whilst Hamper, if found, was to be kept under observation, he was for the moment to be free from arrest, and seemingly these instructions had been carried out.

"Show him up, please."

As the boy, somewhat diffidently, entered his room, Inspector Higgins rose from his seat with outstretched hand.

"Well, Tommy. I'm glad you escaped from the big house O.K."

"Yes, thank you, sir. I got away all right, but . . ."

"I'm not a bit interested in your subsequent adventures, Tommy"—airily. "I merely want to ask you a few questions about previous happenings."

Thomas Hamper seemed unaccountably relieved at the statement.

"First of all, Tommy. It's my unpleasant duty to warn you that anything you say may be taken down and subsequently used as evidence against you."

"But you promised Jill——" began the boy, hotly.

"And I always keep my promises," interrupted the inspector, suavely. "That warning is more to protect myself than anything else. Don't let it unduly frighten you. Now for a few questions."

"All right. I'll try and answer them."

"First of all, I would like to know about the man you followed into that empty house in Horton Road the night before Jill and I found you there."

"What about him?"

"You're not very helpful, Tommy. His name's Sanderson, as you know. You followed him in because you thought he had had something to do with your father's death."

"Not quite, sir. I knew him to be an old associate of my father's. I hadn't then heard anything to lead me to believe that my father's death had been other than suicide."

"You were knocked on the head whilst there, I believe. Who did that?"

"Blowed if I know, sir. All I do know is that it wasn't Sanderson who did that."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"H'm." Might, of course, have been Mapell himself, or the man Heckenstein. Couldn't very well have been Raymond, who must even then have been waiting for the bus on which he was murdered; and Soapy was out of the question—he hadn't the necessary nerve.

"Mapell, perhaps?"—in pleasant enquiry.

"Might have—er—I don't know who you mean."

"Come off it, Tommy," said Higgins, vulgarly. "It

may ease your mind if I tell you that a certain letter addressed to you by your late father has—er—fallen into our hands."

The boy was silent for a moment, then: "Lord, sir. I wouldn't have let the old chap down. If I hadn't been such a fool as to lose the run of that letter . . ."

"Don't you worry yourself, Tommy. We were already on to the gang. You haven't given them away, or let down the old man."

"Honour bright?"

"Of course."

The boy seemed immeasurably relieved.

"Now then, Tommy. Think carefully before you answer my next question." A brief pause, then: "When did you tell Jill Crawford that Raymond had—er—got it in the neck?"

The answer came spontaneously. "Why, when I wrote and asked her to have a look for my father's letter."

"I see"—thoughtfully. "Thank you, Tommy. That's all I have to ask you."

The boy was silent for a moment, turning uneasily this way and that, obviously under the stress of some secret emotion. At last he broke the silence.

"There's something else I—er—wish to say, Inspector. I—er—I . . ."

"Whoa! Whoa, Tommy! Wait a minute," shouted the inspector in apparent alarm. "Don't be too precipitous. This isn't the—er—confessional, you know. You've gotter be careful what you say now I've warned you. You ought to have legal advice you know. You er . . ."

"I don't know any lawyer, sir. You see, it's like this . . ."

"Wait a minute. Let's look one up. . . . Always better to be on the safe side." Higgins chattered on amicably, whilst he pulled towards him a large red directory. "Here we are. Let's find a firm of solicitors living within easy radius of Scotland Yard! I suppose you don't mind who

it is. They're all good. How's this sound to you? Succour and Son. That's a cheering sort of name for a firm of solicitors. They do you? Right. Let me see. Yes. You'd better ask for Mr. William Succour. He's the junior partner. Cheaper, you know. I'll pay any charge. Tell him what you like and ask his advice. When he advises you, mind you follow out his instructions. I'll tell one of my men to show you the way. That's all right"—airily.

When, a few minutes later, young Thomas Hamper was conducted from the room by a constable instructed by the inspector, Higgins sank back into his seat with a sigh, pulled out his handkerchief and solemnly mopped his brow.

"Gosh!" he murmured as he pulled the telephone instrument towards him.

"Hallo! Hallo! Embankment 18181. Hallo! Hallo! Succour and Son? Put me through to Mr. William, please. Hallo! Mr. William Succour? That you, Bill? Higgins speaking. Look here, old man. I've sent round a youngster with a load on his mind. . . . What's that? . . . Commission? . . . Commission me foot! He's going to tell you a harassing yarn, and ask your advice. . . . You'd better tell him to say nothing. . . . It'll all blow over or something. What's that? . . . You'd probably have told him that in any case? . . . I wonder. . . . He's to keep mum. . . . That's the main thing. . . . How's the missus? . . . Good. . . . Keep off the beer! . . . Cheerio!" Higgins rang off.

That, at least, was that!

Once more Inspector Higgins mopped his brow. Tommy! He liked the kid! Still, young Thomas Hamper was asking for trouble, and if the lad were not mighty careful it would be the inspector's job to see that he got it! These promiscuous confessions were the very devil to a conscientious police officer. Once given, after the official warning, they must be acted upon, irrespective of any

personal feelings. And Duty (still with a capital D) was always Duty to Higgins, albeit the inspector did not want Tommy to confess to something of which he would be bound to take official notice.

His meditation was interrupted by the ringing of his telephone bell. He reached for the receiver, and a voice at the other end of the wire cheerily enquired:

"Inspector Higgins?"

"Speaking."

"Good. Rutherford of the River Police this end. I believe you're looking for an old girl of about fifty-eight. Greying hair, poorly dressed, wedding ring on left hand . . ."

"That's right. Name of Hick. Have you found her?"

"'M. Yes."

"Good. There's a few questions I'll have to put to her. I'll come at once."

"No good"—laconically. "She's dead! We've just fished her out of the river."

CHAPTER XXXII

IN WHICH A MAN TELEPHONES

SO Mrs. Hick was dead. Knowing but little she knew too much. Mapell would stick at nothing to conceal his identity, and Mrs. Hick, poor soul, was one of the few outsiders who had seen him in the flesh. Jill Crawford had also seen the man. Inspector Higgins once more pulled the telephone towards him, and, having obtained his connection, gave some terse instructions, then snapped back the receiver.

Mrs. Hick. Was she likely to have committed suicide? Most unlikely. She seemed to be too much in love with life to end it precipitately by her own hand. Yet the alternative was murder. Murder. If Inspector Higgins were correct in his reasoning then Mapell already had at least two murders on his conscience. A third was not likely to worry him overmuch, especially as the third constituted such a danger. Mapell must by this time have been cognisant of the police activities in connection with the death of Henry Hamper, and must have realised that the police had connected the bogus constable of that Sunday night with Mapell of the big house. Assuming that Mapell was responsible for the death of Mrs. Hick, then the man must be getting rattled.

Inspector Higgins, as soon as he had come to this conclusion, gave instructions for the watch on the ports to be doubled, and for the photograph of Mapell (although it was so out of date) to be circulated throughout the country. If Mapell were on the run, then their chances of catching the man were rosy. A criminal in a hurry always makes a mistake.

Again the telephone bell rang out its insistent summons, and the inspector eyed the instrument askance. It seemed as if every time he settled down to concentrate upon this case he was to be interrupted. Wearily he lifted the receiver, and voiced a desultory "Hullo!"

"Someone wishes to speak to you, sir."

"Who is it? I'm busy!"

"Won't give a name, sir."

"Then tell him to go to hell!" Savagely Inspector Higgins replaced the receiver on its hook, but, a second later, the bell was again ringing.

"Now what?"

"Sorry, sir. He says he's a friend of Mr. Sudd."

Sudd? Sudd? Gosh! *Soapy.*

"All right. Put him through."

There was a metallic click within the earpiece, which almost deafened the inspector, and caused him to mutter imprecations beneath his breath. Then:

"Hullo! Inspector Higgins?"

Higgins was immediately galvanised into life, his body tensed and became rigid. It was the "voice"! He'd know it anywhere! He pulled himself together, and subjected his emotion sufficiently to reply in a studiously casual voice:

"Yes. Higgins speaking. Who are you?"

"I—er—think you know me, Inspector."

"Friend of Mr. Sudd—so I was told—though who Mr. Sudd is I haven't the faintest. . . ."

"Then why did you consent to speak to me after refusing to do so?"

"Merely curiosity. But I'm busy. Who are you?"

Inspector Higgins infused into his voice just a faint suggestion of asperity to bolster up his remark. Meanwhile his brain was working at incredible speed. He pulled a pad towards him and was writing furiously thereon with his free hand.

"The Mr. Sudd to whom I referred is sometimes known as 'Soapy'!"

"What! Soapy Sudd?"—an inflection of complete surprise in his voice. "Then you're . . ."

"Exactly."

"Well, what d'y' want?"

"I want you to call it off."

"What the blazes are you driving at?"

Time was what the inspector wanted. Time. He pressed the bell at his side impatiently, and tore the top sheet from the pad on which he had been writing.

"What I say. Call it off! I'll make it worth your while."

Deeply as the inspector's soul resented this suggestion, yet he knew he must play for time. That messenger was a devil of a time coming. Again he pressed the bell.

"Worth my while, eh? H'm. Worth my while! Well—er . . ."—artistically. A man tempted and about to fall!

There was a knock at the door. The messenger at last. Higgins placed his hand over the mouthpiece of the instrument and called out: "Come in."

The messenger entered and was about to speak when Higgins placed the tips of his fingers on his lips, then pointed to the sheet of paper on the table in front of him. The man walked to the desk, picked up the piece of paper, and read it.

Urgent. Trace this call. Telephone nearest station to arrest caller. I'll keep him as long as possible.

The messenger turned to Higgins with a startled expression in his eyes, but meeting such a frown of concentrated venom in the inspector's countenance, he turned about and incontinently bolted from the room.

The voice at the other end of the wire spoke again:

"Think, my dear Inspector, what you could do with —say—twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand. . . . Lot o' money, that! . . ."

"More than you could earn in a lifetime, Higgins," the other interposed quickly.

"I—er—I . . . I can't decide in such a hurry, man. I . . ."

"It's now or never, Higgins. I'm going to cut adrift from the others. Raymond's gone. So's Hamper. Sanderson's in your tender care. There's only Soapy left. He's a bit of a pal of yours, isn't he, Higgins?"

"Scarcely that. . . ." Inspector Higgins was reaching the end of his tether. How long would it take the messenger to act? Five minutes to ascertain from the Exchange the place where the call originated. Then five more minutes to notify the nearest police station. Then it all depended where the other end of the wire was situated! And yet he must keep this man at the telephone or the chance would be lost! "What d'y' mean about Soapy?" he asked, weakly.

"Why, I'll do him in before I bolt for it. He knows too much. Now then, Higgins. It's your last chance. What about it?"

"Well—er—I—er——" Then Inspector Higgins had an inspiration. He stopped abruptly, then, removing his head a few inches further from the mouthpiece, he addressed an imaginary person on the other side of his room.

"Shan't be a moment, sir. Just a personal call. Urgent, you say, sir? All right." Speaking closely to the mouthpiece of the transmitter, Inspector Higgins continued: "I say, old chap, my Chief's just come in. Would you mind ringing me up in—er—— How long shall you be, sir, d'y' think? . . . Five minutes? Thank you, sir. . . . Say in about ten minutes, old chap. . . . You will? . . . Thanks very much. . . . Sorry an' all that, you know. . . ." Inspector Higgins hung up the receiver, remarking, as he did so, to the imaginary caller: "And now, sir . . ."

Then he sat stock still and stared at the telephone. His bluff was not very strong, but it had been the best he

could think of on the spur of the moment. The main point was whether the bluff was strong enough. He might have argued the point with Mapell in the forlorn hope that the police might arrive at the other end of the wire in time, but he had deliberately cut short the conversation and gambled for a further ten minutes. He had burnt his boats now. All that was left to do was to hope for the best. Would Mapell smell a rat, or would he telephone again? Meanwhile, how was the messenger progressing? Inspector Higgins once more rang his bell.

Two minutes later there was a knock at his door, and in response to his invitation the messenger re-entered the room.

"Well. Any luck?"

"Call office in the West End, sir.

"In London, eh? Good. Well?"

"I telephoned the Strand Station, sir, a second before you rang your bell, just now. They're sending along a couple of men at once. They're on their way now, sir. B-but he's rung off, sir."

"That's all right. I'm hoping he'll ring up again. If we catch the fellow I'll not forget your promptitude."

Inspector Higgins nodded dismissal to the man, and once more surveyed his telephone instrument. Would Mapell 'phone again? He pulled out his gun-metal watch in a frenzy of impatience. Call office in the West End, eh. Strand Police Station. Say five minutes to do the journey. H'm. Would Mapell be prepared? Were two men enough to effect his arrest?

Again he rang the messenger bell, and enquired of the man the number of the call-office telephone.

"Langham 14796? Thanks."

No. He dared not ring up the telephone box. That would blow the gaff completely. Surely Mapell must smell a rat. He'd be a fool if he didn't. And Inspector Higgins had good reason to know that Mapell was no fool. Oh, law! This suspense. . . . And when he did ring up (supposing

for a moment that he was fool enough to do so), what on earth was Higgins going to say to him? Must be prepared with something or other. . . . Must be careful not to overplay his already weak hand. . . . Weak—it was a Yarborough! Still. Let's think now. Mapell wanted to bribe him to . . . A preliminary tinkle, then again the telephone bell was ringing spasmodically. Inspector Higgins took a firm grip of himself, then slowly lifted the receiver. He decided to continue his bluff. Without waiting for the other to speak, he burst out in a voice charged with irritation:

"Look here, Strange. I told you that you were not to put any more calls through to me for a few minutes. I'm engaged with the Chief. If a friend of mine rings up tell him I shan't be a minute, and . . ." Turning away from the instrument. "Going, sir. Right. I'll attend to the matter. Good-day, sir." Then again into the mouthpiece, softly, and with a suggestion of conspiracy: "Hullo! Put the gentleman through. . . . Oh! It is you, is it? Yes. The Chief's just gone. . . . Yes. It's all clear, now. . . . Er. . . . What was the sum you mentioned?"

"Twenty thousand pounds"—impressively from the other end of the wire.

"Twenty thousand. . . . Not enough." Then inconsequently: "And how am I to get it?"

"Aha! That's better. Details can easily be arranged. I can ring you up again."

"But it's not enough, I tell you. We're hard on your heels and it'll take me all my time to call it off."

"Don't talk rot, man. You've got nothing to go on. There's no one who's seen me."

"What about Mrs. Hick? She can help identify you." Higgins was playing desperately for time, yet, for all that, his question was subtle. Would Mapell fall into this trap?

"Mrs. Hick, eh? Yes, of course, there's she. Still I don't

think somehow she'll be much use if it comes to identification."

Mapell was giving nothing away, apparently! And would those fools from the Strand Station never arrive? The mental strain was beginning to tell upon the inspector.

"Look here. You talk of twenty thousand pounds. We know you to be hard up. If you had twenty thousand pounds there'd be no need to—er—square anybody, would there?"

"A good point. This is twenty thousand pounds' worth of negotiable securities. You could sell 'em—I can't—without a lot of bother."

"Bonds, eh? Then twenty thousand certainly isn't enough. Make it twenty-five."

"Nothing doing."

"Look here. It's worth it. We'll get you before long."

Ardently the inspector hoped that this was the truth. These Strand men must be paralysed or something!

"My dear Inspector"—patiently, from the other end of the wire—"will it help any if I tell you that you've never heard my natural voice—because I assume that you are flattering yourself that you could easily recognise me by my voice. When speaking to others I always disguise it. It comes as second nature to me now after years of practice, and I'm never likely to be trapped into using a tone of voice other than my own, am I?"

"N-no"—uncertainly. "I suppose not."

"Also, my dear Inspector, I'm one of the few men who can disguise my handprints."

"Gat-away!"—derisively, in an attempt to lead the other into an explanation which would waste some precious seconds.

"True. I wear special gloves, which not only conceal my own fingerprints but also leave behind fictitious ones. Ingenious, don't you think?"

"Yes . . . if true."

"Ha. You're half-convinced. Now then, Higgins. What

about it? . . . I can't afford to waste any more time."

With this statement Inspector Higgins was in entire agreement, for he inwardly marvelled that he had been able to hold the man in conversation for the time which he had! In his mind's eye he could visualise the Strand policemen strolling along, smoking cigarettes, in no apparent hurry and possibly stopping to watch the inevitable navvies at work upon the road. He'd find out the two responsible, and get them the sack! He'd give them the biggest dressing-down they'd ever had in their lives, before, however.

"Well, Higgins? What's the matter?"

"I'm wondering how you'll pay me, and . . . How d'y' know I'll keep my word?"

"I shall want a receipt—that'll keep you quiet. . . . Come along man! Hurry up! I can't wait here all day! And . . ." There was a chuckle of genuine amusement at the other end of the wire. "Oh, lord! I wonder! By the way, Higgins, I'm not 'phoning from the same place as I did before. . . . I'm not such a fool as all that, you know!"

With a savage exclamation of disgust Inspector Higgins slammed on the receiver.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS DOES SOME VISITING

BEFORE he had released the receiver from his grasp Inspector Higgins regretted his precipitate action. In his disgust at being outwitted he had let his anger run away with his discretion. Mapell was now warned that there was nothing further doing in the bribe line. Lord! What a fool I am, reflected Higgins, mentally kicking himself. If he hadn't cut off he might have been able to string Mapell along until the other telephone booth had been traced. True, the stringing of Mapell would have been a weary and nerve-racking business, yet . . . Inspector Higgins impatiently waggled the receiver.

"You cut me off, miss," mendaciously, to the operator who answered his call, in the hope that he might be instantly re-connected.

"Did you make the call, sir?"

"No, miss."

"Then if you'll replace your receiver they may ring up again, and . . ."

"They may not," interrupted Higgins, sarcastically. "Scotland Yard this end, as you're probably well aware. Find that number, miss, and report to me immediately. Higgins, Inspector. And now give me—er——" Higgins glanced at the paper on his desk upon which he had recorded the telephone number of the call office from which Mapell had originally telephoned. "—Er—Langham 14796 . . . Hallo! . . . Hallo! . . ."

"Well?" a casual voice at the other end of the wire answered him.

"Who are you?" queried Higgins, testily.

"And who are you?" in a similar tone of voice.

This was getting them nowhere.

"I'm Higgins of the Yard."

"Oh, sorry, sir! I'm Keller of the Strand. Your bird had vanished by the time we got here, which was about three minutes after we got your telephone message. Worst of it is we don't know whom to look for."

"And I, worse luck, can give no description; but 'phone me in about five minutes and I can put you on to another call office. You'll be too late, of course, but it's Mapell we're looking for. You've seen his photo, but that's twenty years old, unfortunately. Goodbye."

Disconsolately Inspector Higgins rang off.

Was Mapell speaking the truth when he suggested that he consistently disguised his voice? That distinctive hard calculating voice! Was it his usual voice or was it merely a pose for effect and possibly protection? And that blarney about disguising fingerprints. That bluff about the glove! If it were true then the only clue in the hands of the police would vanish. The thumbprint which was indelibly impressed upon the inspector's memory was utterly useless. Impossible. It must be impossible! One impression had been recovered from the big house. Was it likely that the man Mapell had worn the gloves whilst in the presence of his associates and before his suspicions had been aroused? Hardly likely. No. The man must have been bluffing when he suggested that he always wore gloves to disguise his fingerprints. Higgins cheered up at the thought.

A moment later the telephone operator rang up with the further information as to the number and situation of the second call office which Mapell had used that day. It was also in the West End, but half a mile away from the previous one. Two minutes later the additional information had been handed on to the two men from the Strand Police Station, and they immediately set off on what promised to be a fruitless errand.

A knock at the door.

"The young lady, sir."

"Ah! Come in, Miss Crawford." The inspector's voice was tinged with an indefinable relief. "I'm glad you were able to come."

"Of course I was—but what is it all about?"

"Reverting to the man whom you saw follow me into that empty house at Horton Road: the description you've given us would fit most average men. Here's the point—are you certain that you would be able to recognise him were you to see him again?"

"Well—I don't really know. There was little light save from the moon, but—well, I believe I could."

"In that case I'm going to ask you to move. In fact I should like you to stay here a few days. Our resident matron will be glad to put you up."

"But why . . ."

"Look here, miss. I don't want to frighten you, but—to a certain desperate criminal—you know too much."

"I'm sorry, but I can't."

"In that case—I, too, am sorry—I must use force."

"You daren't!" Jill Crawford flared up.

"H'm." Inspector Higgins turned to the waiting messenger. "Arrest this young lady for being in enclosed premises at Horton Road with—er—with intent. That's it. With intent. Vague but useful."

The man's expression was one of complete bewilderment and surprise, and but for the interception of a covert wink from the inspector he, apparently, would have stood by for hours.

"Come along, missy."

"Oh, I'll stay, Inspector."

"That's very sensible, Jill."

"Miss Crawford, please."

"I—er—meant Miss Crawford, Jill."

. . . . . .

"Ah, Tommy. So you've seen the solicitors and unburdened your soul? And what is the result?"

"I—I've got nothing to say, sir."

"What? They told you to keep mum?"—superb surprise in his voice.

"Yessir."

"Who did you see?"

"Mr. William Succour, sir. Chap about your age. He was very insistent. Told me I mustn't breathe a word of what I told him to you. And the things he said about you policemen!" Tommy chuckled in appreciation.

"Eh? What things?"

"Coo. I shouldn't like to tell you, sir."

"H'm." Next time he saw Bill Succour Inspector Higgins promised to say a few things about solicitors in general and the junior partner of Messrs. Succour and Son in particular!

"Well. I'm sorry, Tommy, but we'll have to keep you for a few days."

"Arrested, sir?"

"Well—er—you—er—shouldn't carry revolvers without a licence, you know."

. . . . . .

The sporting rifle found by Inspector Higgins behind the skirting-board in that room at 79, Horton Road, had been duly reported upon by the gun expert of Scotland Yard. There was not the slightest sign of a fingerprint, although it had been tested with complete thoroughness. The barrel had not been cleaned since last it had been fired, and the bullet which had killed the man found on top of the bus fitted the rifle. The maker's name and the distinctive number of the rifle had been carefully removed—possibly by some chemical means—but the gun expert had ascertained that the makers were The Eureka Sports Gun Manufacturing Corporation.

The manager of this Company was the embodiment of courtesy and gave to the police every help. The gun was one of the Company's latest models, and sample weapons had been sent to over a hundred dealers mostly on sale

or return. Most of their business, however, was done direct with rifle ranges and clubs, although, and for this the police were thankful, no club had been served direct with this model.

With regard to the sample weapons, the model was so comparatively new that no returns of sales had yet been received, and so it was necessary to make individual enquiries. The manager supplied addresses and telephone numbers of his clients, and four constables at the Yard had spent a morning busily telephoning to these customers to ascertain whether any of their models had yet been sold.

With regard to these enquiries over eighty had not yet made any sale, and of the remaining twenty fifteen had sold one each, and five were not on the telephone. The fifteen sales had to be traced and, as names and addresses were forthcoming, it was a simple matter to check up the purchasers.

It was subsequently ascertained that each of the fifteen produced his gun for inspection, and the mere fact of producing the gun was a sufficient alibi.

The remaining five so old-fashioned as to be without a telephone required personal interviews, which Inspector Higgins duly undertook.

Three were in London, two in the provinces. The two latter were duly communicated with by letter, whilst the three Londoners were fairly near to one another.

Inspector Higgins set off to the first on his list, J. Blount and Co., gunsmiths. The "and Co." was apparently eyewash, for the sole proprietor was Mr. J. Blount himself, and he greeted the inspector cheerily.

"No, sir. We've sold none of that make yet, although I'm told it's quite a good gun of its type—wonderfully accurate—and so forth."

"Indeed! And who told you?"—quietly, with a casual glance at Mr. Blount.

"Er—as a matter of fact I have it on the authority of the makers themselves." Mr. Blount laughed heartily.

"Don't take too much notice of my—er—professional patter, Mr. Inspector."

Higgins consulted a list, and then asked if he might see such of the models as the gunsmith might have on the premises.

"Certainly, sir." Mr. Blount walked to a rack and waved his hand airily. "There you are, sir. Four on 'em."

"Ah. Thanks very much. I must be getting along."

Inspector Higgins left the shop somewhat crestfallen, for according to the list supplied by the manager of the Eureka Sports Gun Manufacturing Corporation, four had been the number supplied to Messrs. J. Blount and Co.

The next on his list was Mr. Tyndall, gunsmith and cartridge-maker, of Shoreditch. No "and Co." this time.

The shop was dingy and dusty, although the sign-writing over the plate-glass window seemed of fairly recent origin. The walls were lined with racks in which guns of various makes were standing, whilst the counter was, in effect, merely a glass case, containing all sorts of leathern goods. Straps, fancy handbags, and even umbrellas were displayed, and it was patent that the selling of guns and ammunition was far from being the proprietor's sole means of earning a living.

Behind the glass case which served as a counter stood a lugubrious individual of about forty years of age. Medium height and affecting a drooping moustache. His demeanour forlorn and hopeless. Nevertheless he brightened up considerably at the inspector's entrance.

"Good afternoon, sir. And what may I have the pleasure of showing you?" The man's voice held a false note of optimism.

"Well—I haven't actually come to buy anything," began Higgins, and the man's face fell at the announcement.

"Oh, lord!" said the man, wearily. "No one ever does in this confounded place. I'm getting sick of it. I got swindled over this business." The man's voice rose as he recited his wrongs, and Inspector Higgins, partly out of

deference to the man's apparent misery and partly in the hope that he might learn something if he let the other talk, made no attempt to stop the flow, nor to state his business.

"I worked hard all my life and bought this business. Now I've barely three hundred pounds left. I'm chucking it and going abroad. Do you know, sir, I've only sold one dog-collar, on which I made tuppence farthing, the entire week, and . . ." With an obvious effort the man pulled himself together, and favoured Higgins with a sickly smile. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm letting my troubles run away with me—telling you all my family history like this. What actually did you want?"

"It's about a gun—a recent model of the Eureka Sports Gun people which may have been bought here."

"Nothing wrong with it, I hope, sir? I can't possibly give you any money back. You see——"

"You've sold such a gun, then?" queried the detective eagerly.

"Well . . ." The man obviously did not know what to say. He was, without doubt, trying to see which way the cat would jump. If he denied selling, then he might lose an order for cartridges or bullets which might ensue if he admitted selling the gun; whereas, on the other hand, should there be anything wrong with the gun . . .

"Why?" he asked, eventually.

Inspector Higgins produced his official card. The man was suitably impressed. "As a matter of fact, sir, I—er—did sell one of the Eureka models a few weeks ago. It's practically the only item over a pound which I *have* sold. Dirty swindler the chap who swung this place on me. Failing business. No custom . . . No . . ." He broke off, disgustedly.

"So you have sold such a weapon, eh?" Higgins ill-restrained his eagerness. "Would you recognise the man, do you think?"

"Don't suppose so"—dispiritedly and uninterestedly.

"Might, but . . ." The man shrugged his shoulders, in a denial of responsibility.

"Think, man, think!"—urgently. "If it's the only sale of any size you've made, surely . . ."

"Don't rub it in, sir. It's painful enough to be swindled, without anyone adding insult to injury."

"Believe me, sir, I've no wish to add to your troubles, but, as a responsible citizen, the police need your help. Now then, Mr. Tyndall—I suppose you *are* Mr. Tyndall?"

"That's my name. I suppose you saw it over the shop window. I owe for the sign-writing still"—lugubriously.

"Well, sir," Inspector Higgins withdrew from his pocket the only photograph of the man Mapell in the possession of the police, and handed it to the man, "is that the man who purchased the Eureka gun?"

For a full minute the other studied the photograph, then:

"I dunno. Might be, of course"—casually and without interest. "The man was of the same age, anyhow."

"Same age?"—incredulously, from the inspector.

"Yes. Might be a bit younger."

And the photograph was at least twenty years old! Involuntarily the inspector's thought reverted to the only man of the age of the photograph connected with the case. Young Thomas Hamper!

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR IS WARNED

FOR some moments there was complete silence, broken only by the embarrassed fidgeting of Mr. Tyndall, and the stertorous breathing of Inspector Higgins. Then the inspector emitted a sigh of relief. He had no evidence that the gun under discussion was the one which had been used in the murder of the man Raymond. Might be a coincidence after all. At any rate, the purchaser might have been any young man of Hamper's age, and might be entirely unconnected with the case.

Still, personal feelings must be put aside; the law required a victim; Duty must be done.

"Will you come and try to identify the man—if called upon?"

"I—er—I can't very well. I'm sailing for Canada on Saturday. Bought me tickets, and so forth. It's hard at my time o' life to start again, but needs must, when one gets swindled in a business. Fancy! All my savings invested in a dying business. It—it breaks my heart! It . . ." The man broke off, seemingly on the verge of tears. Inspector Higgins was painfully embarrassed.

"We'll—er—we'll make it up to you, and all that, you know. Although, of course, if we chose, we could—prevent you sailing if it were in the interests of justice so to do."

"Of course, Inspector. If you pay my expenses . . ." The other brightened at the suggestion of compensation for time lost, although he seemed none too pleased at the prospect of having his start abroad postponed. "Well—that's different. What do you want me to do?"

"I'll let you know to-morrow morning."

"Right. I'll be here. I live overhead."

Inspector Higgins made his departure, but immediately telephoned to Headquarters for a man to be put on Mr. Tyndall's tracks. It would never do were the man to ignore the official request and leave the country without attempting to identify the purchaser of the gun.

. . . . . .

The replies from the provincial gunsmiths were duly received. One informed the inspector that his models had not yet been sold, but the other letter is worthy of being set out in full.

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter of even date, I have to inform you that of the dozen samples of the Eureka No. 7 model sporting rifle sent to us on sale or return by the manufacturers, six only have been sold. These, with a box of bullets, were sent on the 3rd October last, to

Mr. Hamper,
Medhurst.

Should you require any further information we shall be happy to supply same.

Yours faithfully,

Then followed a hieroglyphic, completely indecipherable.

Inspector Higgins set off post-haste for the big house at Medhurst. The place was still under police surveillance, and to the sergeant in charge the inspector explained the reason for his visit.

"No, sir. The rifle range hasn't been touched. But I thought you'd been over it."

"I have—perfunctorily. But I want to go again."

"Very good, sir."

Inspector Higgins recognised the model immediately. The last time he had searched the place he had not found

the weapon at Horton Road, but now he had something to go upon.

"That's the chap, Sergeant. Any more?"

"Four more, sir. Five in all."

"Five? You're sure?"

A thorough search failed to reveal any more weapons of that make.

Higgins was disappointed. He had hoped to find only four of the six. Five rather spoiled his calculations.

. . . . . .

"A letter for you—er—Chief!"

"Chief?" Higgins frowned. He hated levity, especially from a subordinate, yet Sergeant Mercier had a reputation to keep up!

"That's what it says on the envelope, sir. Chief Inspector Higgins." Mercier coughed. "I thought perhaps you'd been promoted or something."

"No such luck"—good-humouredly.

"And—there's thruppence to pay."

Higgins grinned cheerfully, and paid over the surcharge, the envelope being without a stamp. "If only promotion were as cheap as that, Mercier!"

Inspector Higgins slit the envelope and withdrew a dirty sheet of paper, at which he frowned thoughtfully.

Keep away from the Mansions—A frend.

Inspector Higgins grinned, then handed the paper to Sergeant Mercier.

"A very illuminating document, Mercier. I wonder who our 'frend' is? Just run along and look up the finger-prints on this. There are quite half a dozen distinct impressions. And where the Mansions are from which I am advised to keep away—well, I haven't the faintest idea."

Sergeant Mercier smiled and withdrew. Five minutes later he returned, still smiling.

"Your 'frend,' sir, is Soapy Sudd."

"Soapy, eh?" Higgins looked up with sudden interest.

"Yessir. Three prints of his left hand, where he had steadied the paper whilst he wrote this effusion, and one of the forefinger and thumb of his right, possibly when he inserted the paper in the envelope."

"Poor old Soapy. When will he learn sense and wear rubber gloves?"

"Goodness knows, sir. He's one of the old school and scorns such modern forms of protection. He's rather like an old batsman who refuses to wear batting gloves no matter how many times he's rapped over the knuckles."

(Sergeant Mercier spoke as with authority, but, considering that his batting average for his Department in the Police Shield was only one-point-five runs per innings, his simile was perhaps a little too colourful.)

Inspector Higgins was, however, not listening. His question had been purely rhetorical and his mind instantly switched to the warning sent by Soapy. Keep away from the Mansions. The Mansions now had a particular significance, for, at the moment, Higgins had no intentions of visiting any Mansions. What Mansions? Birkenhead Mansions, née (if the expression be permissible) Bulstroade's Buildings, did not seem to fit, although a visit there might be necessary in connection with the death of Mrs. Hick. Then what other Mansions? Perhaps the point would become less obscure with the passing of time. Higgins ran over in his mind all the places which he had visited in the course of his investigations. Again he came back to the starting-point—Birkenhead Mansions. No. Soapy couldn't have meant that salubrious residence. Perhaps . . .

"I wonder."

Inspector Higgins had suddenly bethought himself of Bobby Bunter, the car thief, who, having spent a night in a cell, had been released after the abortive raid on the block of flats outside which he had left the stolen car. What the deuce was the name of that block of flats? Got it! Sunningdell Mansions. It was all very well to warn him

to keep away, but he had had no intention of going! Was it a very subtle trap on the part of Mapell? Having failed to tempt Higgins by bribery was he trying to lure him to the Mansions by means of this warning?

Half an hour's concentrated thought almost convinced the inspector that the thing was too subtle as a trap. For one thing, if it were a trap, then the Mansions mentioned would probably have been more explicitly named. As matters stood it was just like Soapy to omit the vital words necessary to give his warning effect.

Higgins, however, was not kept long in doubt, for by the next post he received a further communication, somewhat similar to the first, but this time with a signature.

The man you want is hiding at 10, *Sunningdell Mansions, Maida Vale. If you come along quietly to-night he'll be alone. Don't give me away—Soapy Sudd.*

This time, however, a minute search failed to reveal any fingerprints, although it was apparent that the paper and envelope were of the same texture as those used for the unsigned warning.

"Well, Sergeant, I'm inclined to think that something particularly sticky awaits me at No. 10, Sunningdell Mansions."

"If that is so, sir, you owe a debt of gratitude to your —er—friend, the old-fashioned Soapy."

"I wonder, Mercier. I wonder. Do you think it likely I should have been taken in by this second note?"

"With all due respect, sir, there's no question of your being 'taken in' as you term it. It's merely a question of fact. This letter supplies information which may or may not be correct. You can't tell until you've been to see. In any case you cannot afford entirely to ignore the letter—you *must* investigate Sunningdell Mansions. The unsigned note from Soapy merely behooves you to be extra careful in your investigation."

Inspector Higgins surveyed his subordinate quizzically. Mercier's reputation for somewhat childish humour had dimmed the fact that occasionally he emitted words of wisdom. Higgins was mildly surprised.

"Thank you, Sergeant," he said, quickly, and nodded dismissal.

Number Ten, Sunningdell Mansions! Come along quietly to-night! He'll be alone! Did Mapell assume that these words would tempt Inspector Higgins to visit the flat alone in order to effect a spectacular arrest singlehanded and thus keep all the glory to himself?

And if he went alone what sort of a reception awaited him? Higgins smiled. Mercier was right when he insisted that he *must* investigate the Mansions. Of course, it would be easy enough to send someone in his stead, but under the circumstances, considering the possibilities of danger, Inspector Higgins did not feel called upon to delegate such duty. There was something personal about the matter.

Certain preliminary questions could be cleared up first. It was a simple matter to ascertain from the estate agents particulars as to the flat, with a plan of its topography. Apparently the flat was let furnished, the present tenant being away. The tenant was a popular sporting figure, a major, and the newspapers recently had been full of descriptions of his party (with photographs) attending the winter sports in Switzerland.

Obviously Mapell had read of this, and with his usual nerve had appropriated the flat for his own use. The odds were about a million to one that he was not within a dozen miles of the place, yet care must be exercised in case he was. Therefore Higgins set off for a preliminary investigation of the Mansions before putting any raid into execution.

Sunningdell Mansions were a block of flats, about a dozen in number, having a common entrance. From the estate agent's description No. 10 was on the second floor. Higgins surveyed the building from the outside,

making no attempt to enter. Then he turned his attention to the rear. Sunningdell Mansions, with three other similar blocks, backed on to a quadrangle of well-nurtured lawn, upon which were marked out two tennis courts. For the convenience of the respective tenants there were speaking-tubes from the back doors to the various flats, with lifts for tradesmen's goods running up the outside walls. Higgins gazed at one such lift with speculative eye.

Yes. It would do.

Later that evening three men stood at the rear of Sunningdell Mansions awaiting instructions from Inspector Higgins. Higgins himself, as a preliminary, had blown up the speaking-tube of No. 10, but nothing had happened. He took a chance in thus warning any possible occupant of his presence outside, but, having learned from the porter of the flats that blowing up the speaking-tubes was a recognised form of entertainment of the children of the neighbourhood, he had decided to take that chance.

Inspector Higgins returned to the three waiting men at the rear.

"Now then, these are my final instructions. I'm going to walk up the stairs till I reach the top of the building. I've greased the pulley wheel of the lift and tested the rope, and the cage of the lift is already at the top. When I signal you must take the strain of the ropes below, then lower the cage gently until I'm level with the second floor. I'm going to get out, and the moment I do so you must pull up the lift to the top of the building again. Then one of you remain at the back, whilst the other two enter the Mansions and walk up the steps till you are outside number ten. Wait there until I signal. If you hear any signs of a struggle, any help will be gratefully received. Also, if after ten minutes you hear nothing, the same remark applies. Bust the door in. The major's a sport—he won't mind."

All went according to plan, save that, in the blackness of the evening, the lift cage looked infinitely more frail

than when the inspector had tested it in the broad light of day. However, it bore his weight, and he found himself on the verandah outside the single French window of No. 10. There was an eerie atmosphere about the place, heightened by the fact that there might be a trap, coupled with the chance that the message might have been genuine and Mapell actually was alone and unsuspecting the other side of the window.

Still, no amount of theorising would make progress on the verandah. Action was needed. Higgins withdrew from his jacket pocket his powerful electric torch, placed the bulb against the window-pane an arm's length away, hoped for the best, and pressed the button.

The resultant beam of light was not answered with a shot, and Higgins breathed a sigh of thankfulness. The torch illuminated the room, which was furnished as a kitchen and was devoid of occupant. Three minutes later Inspector Higgins was within the room.

He tiptoed to the door and gingerly tested the handle. The door yielded. Inspector Higgins gripped the butt of his revolver and felt comforted. Carefully he opened the door. Not a sound!

Once more he brought his torch into use, then gave an exclamation of surprise.

Bound hand and foot to a chair, with his back towards the doorway through which Higgins was peering, was the still form of a man.

A man with snow-white hair.

It was Soapy Sudd—aged almost beyond recognition.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR ADVERTISES

INSPECTOR HIGGINS, after one brief glance at the man in the chair which satisfied himself as to the man's identity, stared intently round the room. Seemingly, Soapy and himself were the sole occupants, so the inspector instantly repaired to release the unfortunate Soapy.

The man was expertly bound and gagged. He could not move an inch, being unable even to turn his head. With great gentleness Higgins removed the gag from the man's mouth, and Soapy's first words were:

"Keep away from the other dore, sir! Keep away from the other dore!"

Higgins, before attempting to release the man from his bonds, walked to the door and examined it with interest, by the aid of his electric torch. Then, throwing discretion to the winds, he switched on the electric light.

Nothing happened.

The resultant illumination of the room revealed something which the torch failed to do—a thin piece of thread attached to the handle.

Higgins followed the lead to its source, then nodded grimly to himself.

Protruding from between two books on a shelf was a revolver, its muzzle pointed directly at the unfortunate Soapy. Attached to its trigger was the thread. Higgins carefully removed the books to find that the revolver had been clamped into position by a cheap thumbscrew vice.

"Look be'ind me, guv'nor."

Inspector Higgins swung round startled, fully expect-

ing to see a sneering Mapell, but there was nothing apparent.

"Opposite the dore—be careful!"

A close inspection of the opposite wall revealed a similar device, but this time the revolver was trained on the door itself.

"How very nice," muttered Higgins.

The thread attached to the trigger was followed back by Higgins, and he found that it was stretched across the room above the height of an average man, but so that the door, when full open would push it forward.

"Primitive, but possibly effective."

He paused to worry the thing out in his mind. Assuming that he had taken the note at its face value, what would he have done? Why—knocked at the door of No. 10, possibly using the formal "Open, in the name of the King," and would then have tried the handle. The immediate result of this would have been to fire the revolver fastened to the shelf. Exit Soapy. What would have been his reaction to the sound of the shot? Why—he would immediately have flung open the door. Exit Higgins. The inspector ran a clammy finger round his collar.

There was a knock at the door.

For one brief second the inspector's faculties seemed paralysed, then he shouted in a voice expressive of an awful fear:

"Keep away from that door!"

"Are you all right, sir?" It was one of his outside helpers.

"Yes, but don't touch the handle of that door."

In his inspection of the room Higgins had forgotten the flight of time and, the ten minutes being up, the man outside was just about to obey his instructions and lend his aid, having heard nothing from the inspector.

Higgins' forgetfulness had almost cost Soapy his life. He turned to the man, but Soapy had fainted.

"Just as well," murmured the inspector.

Two minutes later he had carefully unclamped the revolvers, and disengaged the thread. He was surprised at the stoutness of this, and realised that Mapell had been taking no chances of the thread breaking.

Then he walked to the door.

"It's all right, you fellows. You can clear off now. Tell the chap down below at the back that he can go too."

"All right, sir?"—doubtfully.

"Yes. The raid was a frost."

"I see, sir. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night."

. . . . . .

Soapy Sudd opened his eyes. He was lying on a couch, his head pillowed in Inspector Higgins's arm, whilst the inspector was holding to his lips a glass of whisky, which he had found in a cupboard and commandeered.

"Feeling better now, Soapy?"—gently.

"Yessir. I—I . . ." He gazed fearfully round the room.

"It's all right, Soapy. Nothing to worry about."

"Golly, sir! Why did yer come? Did—didn't nobody warn yer or nuthink?"

Inspector Higgins did not reply for a moment. His first reaction on finding Soapy tied to the chair had been the thought that Soapy had wished him to keep away merely to save himself from capture, but on reasoning things over he saw the fallacy. Had Soapy guessed the part he was to play in the little comedy, instead of warning the inspector, he would have bolted to save his own skin.

"I—er—I thort the chair bisnes was fer you, sir. I didn't fink the swine was savin' it up fer me. The pair on 'em caught me nappin' and tied me up. Lumme, guv'nor, I've bin sweatin' case you turned up arter all!"

"Never mind, Soapy. It was a kindly thought to warn me."

"I 'eard yer come in the winder, sir. You didn't arf make a rah."

Higgins blinked. He had been under the impression that his entrance to the flat had been the acme of silent circumspection. He consoled himself with the thought that the ears of the unfortunate Soapy must have been, owing to his predicament, hypersensitive.

"Yus, guv'nor. W'enever yer crackin' a crib yer gotta keep quiet—it's presential!"

The revolvers were worse than useless as clues, being of a pattern much in use by officers during the war, and obtainable from any second-hand old-iron dealer. The numbers had been carefully filed away, and they were devoid of fingerprints.

Inspector Higgins had questioned Soapy, but he could give no indication as to where Heckenstein or Mapell could be found. He had been left "holding the sack" and was glad of it! At last he had been able to break from the evil influence of the pair.

. . . . . .

And then like a bolt from the blue came a clue of outstanding importance, which of itself was a testimonial to the inspector's thoroughness.

When Mr. Henry Adams, of Mount Helen, Hampstead, had paid his visit to Scotland Yard, and tardily admitted that he had been the mysterious second fare on that fatal last bus, Inspector Higgins had impressed upon him the importance of informing the police were any further demands made upon him for the suppression of the incriminating letters.

Mr. Adams had almost collapsed on learning that further demands might be made, but had agreed to call in the police should such an event happen.

Inspector Higgins, however, was taking no chances, and had given instructions for a careful watch to be kept on Mr. Adams's correspondence. His caution was eventually rewarded, for a photographic reproduction of a letter recently sent to Mr. Adams was duly forwarded to Scotland Yard for inspection, with the annotation that the

original would be delivered upon receiving definite instructions.

Higgins read the letter, and inwardly marvelled.

Henry Adams, Esq.,
Mount Helen,
Hampstead.

Sir,

There have recently come into my hands certain letters in your handwriting, addressed to a certain lady, which I have no doubt you would be glad to recover.

I myself having been in the same unfortunate position, but having come into a small fortune, I willingly paid the thousand pounds demanded by the unscrupulous blackmailers into whose hands my letters had, unhappily fallen.

Your letters were handed to me as a sort of makeweight, or discount, the men possibly assuming that I should endeavour to obtain from you the thousand pounds they had mulct from me.

Naturally, my first impulse was to destroy your letters, but it struck me that you would never know what had happened to them, and would indubitably prefer to recover the letters so that you could attend personally to their destruction.

I would have forwarded them to you direct, but I wondered whether you were still in the land of the living, for it would never do for the letters to fall into the hands of the dear ones you would have left behind.

Should you still be alive, and wish to recover the letters, an advertisement in the Agony column of The Times *addressed to Kathleen and signed Muriel, will ensure a prompt reply from me.*

Of course, I will destroy the letters should you wish it.

Yours very truly,
"Kathleen."

P.S. If you could spare, say, one hundred pounds

towards the thousand I have already lost in this matter, I should be grateful. Please yourself, of course.

P.P.S. Naturally I trust in your honour not to mention this matter to the police, for, after all, I'm in a similar position to yourself, save that I have been lucky enough to recover my incriminating documents.

Inspector Higgins nodded his head approvingly. A "fetching" epistle! Whoever was responsible for the drafting of the letter was fully alive to the weak, vacillating character of Mr. Henry Adams. The P.S. raised a smile, whilst the P.P.S. called forth an appreciative chortle.

"Oh! Kathleen! Kathleen! What subtlety!"

Inspector Higgins reached for the telephone, and gave instructions for the original letter to be held up indefinitely. Then he dictated an advertisement for the Agony column of *The Times.*

Kathleen—am overwhelmed; will split expenses; say five hundred—love—Muriel.

The inspector considered the penultimate word a masterstroke of irony.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN WHICH A DOOR IS OPEN

INSPECTOR HIGGINS had ascertained that the original of the letter to Mr. Henry Adams had been posted in the W. 9 district, from which information he reasoned that it had been posted soon after Soapy Sudd had been left behind in the flat at Sunningdell Mansions. This might or might not be a useful piece of information. On the one hand, Mapell would hardly have posted such a letter had he not been pretty certain that it would not reach the hands of the police; whereas, on the other hand, Mapell knew all there was to know about the tell-tale of a postmark, and the letter being franked "W. 9" would seem to suggest that the Paddington and Maida Vale district was the least likely place in which Mapell would be found.

The advertisement dictated by Inspector Higgins duly appeared in the Agony column of *The Times* the following morning. Higgins had debated within himself the advisability of having a man on hand in case the reply was handed in personally by either Mapell or Heckenstein, but decided against this course upon consideration of the numberless agents which exist for the forwarding of such advertisements. Another factor was that he wished to get the pair of them. If one were caught the other would thereby be warned, and the inspector guessed that the one who would take the risk (unwittingly of course) would be Heckenstein, and Higgins was after the mackerel, not the sprat.

And again, Higgins was not sure that he wanted to catch the sender of the answer to the advertisement—it might merely prove to be an innocent outsider, or, at best,

a minor criminal. No. His great idea was to let the pair give themselves away in their answer.

And that it was not such a forlorn hope as it appeared on the face of it was fully proved in due course.

The following day it was ascertained from a certain source that an answer to the advertisement had been received and would be duly published the following morning. It had been received by the afternoon post with a postal order enclosed to cover the charges, and read as follows:

Muriel—To-morrow Handley House Huntingdon—Kathleen.

Inspector Higgins could scarcely credit the evidence of his eyesight. Here was an address at which, in all probability, both Mapell and Heckenstein were in hiding. What on earth had induced either of them to run such a risk? The answer was probably twofold. In the first place, knowing Mr. Henry Adams as they must have done, they could never have guessed that the police would ever see the letter which they had sent him; the second matter was likely to be a woeful lack of funds. They must have known that the police carefully scrutinise all code messages and the like which appear from time to time in newspapers, yet they took a chance. Yes, it must have been the serious state of their exchequer which had induced them to take the risk.

Of course, there was a third alternative, which was that the letter might be perfectly genuine. This thought somewhat damped the detective's rising spirits.

"Oh, dear!" was his mild exclamation at this disturbing thought.

Inspector Higgins put through a trunk-call to the Superintendent of the Huntingdon Police, with whom he was slightly acquainted, and, whilst waiting for the connection,

busied himself with preparations for a raid of Handley House.

The first point was whether or not the place should be raided, and to this there could be but one answer. Then came the question of the time. Mapell, obviously unsuspicious, would not be expecting a call from Mr. Henry Adams until two days' time; and so, at first blush, it would seem that an immediate raid must contain a further element of surprise. Also, there was the patent fact that delays are dangerous. Yet on the morrow the advertisement would appear which made the appointment for the next day, during the whole of which either Mapell or Heckenstein, and possibly both, must be in attendance at Handley House to receive Mr. Adams and relieve him of his five hundred pounds. And yet, during those thirty-odd hours of waiting there was the faint chance that Mapell might become suspicious and "dodge the column."

At this moment the telephone bell rang, and Higgins was connected with the Huntingdon superintendent. Immediately he made up his mind, and arranged for a warrant to be procured, and asked for a dozen picked men to be ready that night for the raid on Handley House. There's nothing like the present! The superintendent promised to have a police car in readiness by ten o'clock, having informed Higgins that Handley House was a few miles out of the town. Higgins replaced the receiver of his instrument thankful at the prospect of immediate action.

Yet his departure from Scotland Yard was delayed for a couple of hours.

As a matter of fact he had forgotten an arrangement which he had made for Mr. Tyndall, gunsmith and cartridge-maker, of Shoreditch, to call at Scotland Yard for the purpose of attending an identification parade. Had the inspector known the acute mental distress it was to cause him, it is doubtful whether he would have stayed for the parade; and yet again, had he not so stopped be-

hind, then it is highly improbable that the case would ever have reached a satisfactory conclusion.

Inspector Higgins had asked the man to call that day, mainly that a suspicion which had formed in his mind, and which refused to budge, might be swept away. Mr. Tyndall, lugubrious as ever, had reluctantly complied with his request, and expressed the hope that he might have been called on a false alarm, as he wished nothing to delay his departure for Canada at the end of the week. Higgins also ardently hoped that the parade might be a frost, yet he felt that, matters having progressed so far, he must stop to learn the outcome.

The parade was held in the courtyard of Scotland Yard. Twelve men of an age, similar in appearance, all about the same height and general condition, stood in a straight line and stared uneasily at Mr. Tyndall on his approach.

Without a moment's hesitation he picked out one of them.

"This man, Inspector, is the one who purchased that rifle from my shop."

"It's a lie! A damned lie!"

Young Thomas Hamper was led protestingly away.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins sat wearily in his chair and stared into space. In front of him was the sworn deposition of Mr. Tyndall, in which the case against Tommy Hamper was made complete. Higgins was greatly upset at the outcome. His grave suspicions, instead of being lulled to rest, had merely been made into certainties.

Still! Duty was Duty! With a sigh he rose from his desk. This raid. He must go through with it. His eagerness of an hour and a half ago had abated almost to indifference. He knew that the picked men were even now assembling for the raid and waiting for his arrival. . . . Let 'em wait! . . . To think that Tommy . . .

The inspector left Scotland Yard in his two-seater for Huntingdon, refusing the aid of a driver, and using his

own car in preference to an official vehicle, because he could drive it almost automatically, and could thus give himself up to his thoughts. He had instructed a constable to telephone to Huntingdon with the information that he might be an hour or so late, but that the raid would be carried out as soon as practicable after his arrival.

Tommy! . . . Only a kid, yet . . .

Tally-ho Corner . . . Hatfield . . . Hitchin . . . Biggleswade . . . Sandy. . . . Past the gates of Hinchinbroke Castle . . . Huntingdon at last. . . .

Five minutes later Inspector Higgins was ensconced with the superintendent in his private office. The picked men were in readiness, the search warrant had been procured, and the two cars were at the door to convey the men to Handley House. Had the inspector procured a warrant for the arrest of the men? The inspector had. Then what about it?

The procession of three cars left the police station very shortly afterwards. Higgins led the way in his two-seater, having as a guide and passenger the superintendent. The other two cars were to follow at a discreet distance, in order that local curiosity might not be aroused. The superintendent, a man after the inspector's own heart, quick on the uptake, had, immediately upon Higgins's request for a posse, sent an advance guard in the form of an experienced sergeant to make discreet enquiries about the house. He had duly reported that two men had recently been seen there, and that, to the best of his information, they were still on the premises.

"Nice car o' yours, Higgins."

"Very"—shortly and somewhat absent-mindedly.

"How long did it take you to get down from Town?"

"Just over two hours."

"H'm. Speaks well for both your car and the roads, but is perhaps a slight reflection on our colleagues responsible for the observance of the traffic regulations. But perhaps you were pulled up on the way?"

"No."

Smilingly, the superintendent gave it up. His effort to make conversation by unstinted praise of a car-owner's car had, for the first time within his memory, failed. The inspector had something on his mind, unless he was preoccupied as to the probable outcome of the prospective raid.

The remainder of the journey to Handley House was carried out in complete silence, until it was broken at last by:

"Better stop here, Higgins. The house is about a hundred yards further on."

The inspector pulled up without comment and waited for the other cars to catch up before proceeding further. After a fruitless three minutes the two police officials had an uneasy feeling that something had miscarried, for there were no signs of the other cars. At last the superintendent could stand it no longer.

"Something's up, Inspector. We'd better turn back and see what it is."

"You can if you like, Super. I'm going to wait here. Don't you think we might give 'em a few more minutes—after all, I didn't waste must time getting here and might have considerably outdistanced the others—and spend the time in a preliminary investigation?"

"All right," the superintendent acquiesced, uneasily.

Handley House was in complete darkness. It was an old rambling structure, and the superintendent informed Higgins that he had hitherto been under the impression that it had been vacant. A preliminary survey from a distance failed to reveal any signs of any occupant, and at last, impatiently, together they walked the intervening hundred feet between the front of the house and the road.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

The front door was wide open.

"Gosh! We're too late! The swine have slung their hook!"

"Look here, Higgins, I can't help thinking that something's happened to my men in the other cars. If you don't mind I'd like to drive back and see. Coming?"

The superintendent was anxious as to his men's welfare.

"No. I'll hang about till you return."

"Righto."

. . . . . .

The superintendent soon found out the reason for the delay. At the corner of Hartford Road and the Huntingdon High Street, locally known as the Three Tun corner by reason of a public house of that name nearby, he found an interested crowd of people. In spite of the efficiency of the traffic policeman generally on duty there, an accident had occurred. A speed fiend on a motor-cycle had endeavoured to justify a coroner's recent remark, but, fortunately for himself, had just failed to commit suicide whilst in his unsound mind. He had collided with the second police car, the one immediately behind Higgins's two-seater, and had knocked it out of action. The driver of the third car, whose idea of a "discreet distance" consisted of a matter of a dozen feet or so, had just managed to pull up in time, had skidded, and bent his rear wheel. No one was injured, but both cars were temporarily out of action.

In spite of the identity of the occupants of the cars, there was considerable delay in obtaining particulars of the accident, and on the superintendent's arrival on the scene the senior officer of the twelve had only just succeeded in commandeering two more cars in which to continue the journey to Handley House.

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins stared at the open front door, his mind groping for the precise significance of this phenomenon. It seemed to point to sudden flight, yet, if this were correct, what had warned Mapell and Heckenstein of impending danger? Was it that subtle sixth sense which sometimes cautions the habitual criminal?

No matter what it was, the fact remained that the front door was wide open, and that Inspector Higgins was standing outside as if afraid to enter. The house was quiet as the grave; and the superintendent was an unconscionable time finding his lost sheep. . . . Perhaps they'd gone fishing, he thought cynically, being well aware of the local form of recreation. . . . The open door had a strange fascination for the inspector.

At last, with a shrug of his shoulders, he walked boldly in. Nothing happened! Pulling his electric torch from his pocket he examined the hall. Quite ordinary. No signs of an occupant. . . .

He cautiously tried the handle of a door leading out from the hall. It opened easily. His torch showed where an electric light switch protruded from the wall. He deflected the button. The resultant illumination failed to reveal signs of life. Higgins turned out the light, and walked to the next room. Empty. Five minutes later he had proved the entire lower floor to be void of occupant other than himself.

He walked quietly up the stairs. Quietly because of habit, for he made no special effort to refrain from noise.

Upstairs it was pitch dark, and the inspector continued his search of the rooms. The first was a bedroom, but the bed and the other furniture were covered with dustsheets. Higgins was about to leave the room with but a cursory glance, when he stopped and sniffed the air. A smell of smoke! Cigarette, rather than pipe smoke. Instantly he came on the alert. A further keen glance round the room and his eyes alighted on a small spiral of smoke coming from the grate. Immediately Higgins snapped off the electric light and pulled out his revolver.

From the grate a small dull red glow flickered for a moment, then could be seen no more. Someone had been in this room within the last quarter of an hour.

Higgins squared his shoulders and carefully opened the door. Mentally he kicked himself for his precipitation.

Prudence should have counselled him to wait for the others, yet . . . that wide open front door had exercised a strange fascination over him.

Of course, it might be that the occupant of a quarter of an hour ago had since vanished, yet . . . Higgins crept out of the room. Two more rooms he investigated on his hands and knees, and each time he was relieved to find a vacant room. Then . . .

The door was locked. Higgins mentally reviewed the situation from the passage outside. A locked door did not necessarily mean that there was anyone in the room, although the probabilities were that it was so. The inspector applied his ear to the keyhole and listened intently. Not a sound! Of course, were the door bolted that would be an entirely different matter. To bolt a door on the inside whilst remaining outside was a pretty considerable feat!

Inspector Higgins waited five minutes, during which time there was not the slightest sound from within the room. At last, with a resolute expression on his countenance, he applied the muzzle of his revolver to the keyhole, and, with a complete disregard for the property of other people, pressed the trigger.

The resultant discharge of the cartridge, whilst extremely noisy, was far from being effective. A second shot seemed to have little effect, and it was not until the inspector had fired a third time that he realised that the bolt of the lock was no longer functioning.

What then was holding the door? Was someone behind it endeavouring to keep him out? If so, then the best thing Higgins could do would be to retire gracefully and await reinforcements.

He stood well away from the door and considered the position. Suddenly a possible explanation occurred to him. There must be an automatic spring or similar contraption to keep the door closed. Higgins decided to test his theory. Dropping to his hands and knees he pressed

gently upon the door and crawled through the aperture.

The moment he released the door, there was a protesting squeak from the automatic closer. On the instant, from the opposite side of the room, a pencil of light stabbed the darkness, with a simultaneous report from a gun.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN WHICH A BATTLE IS STAGED

INSPECTOR HIGGINS sat in the corner, scarcely daring to breathe. He had been so confident in his mind that the birds had flown, that the shot had nearly frightened him to death. Had he not been crawling upon the floor, the bullet must have hit him.

Then silence.

The effect was eerie. Higgins, seated in the corner, had an awful conviction that someone was creeping along the floor in his direction. At the same time it occurred to him that to stay where he was would be dangerous—he must get a move on! Gingerly he extended a tentative feeling hand, which encountered nothing, so he crawled forward. Totally unaware of the position of the furniture, he was desperately afraid of colliding with some obstacle hidden by the darkness and thus disclosing his position. For he had not the slightest doubt that, were he to make the merest suggestion of noise, the other occupant would immediately pepper him with shot. His heart was pumping like a steamhammer, and seemed to fill the room with sound. With infinite care he crawled away from the door.

Something alive brushed against his arm, and he felt his hair rise on end. It was a cat—an ordinary, domestic cat—yet the relief almost caused him to emit a sigh.

Yes! Without a doubt it was a cat! A cat, moreover, glad to find itself with company! It immediately showed its pleasure in the usual feline way by setting up a purr. Not unlike the sound of the engine of a high-powered car, or of a distant aeroplane.

Inspector Higgins, in an agony of apprehension, wiped

the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand.

For two pins he would blow his whistle in the hope of urging the superintendent and his men to show some signs of life. Yet he was afraid to make any sound in case it should guide a bullet in his direction. It was not a question of fear, but rather of common sense.

In any case, the whole episode was a nightmare. What with the darkness—the absence of sound—the . . .

Gently he pushed the cat away.

Promptly it returned, anxious not to lose its human companion. The inspector, normally a lover of animals, felt that he would sacrifice a month's pay for one good kick at the offending cat.

He pushed it gently away again with his foot. Immediately it rubbed its head all round the boot, and commenced to purr even more loudly than before.

"Gosh!" A mental exclamation followed by a licking of lips.

Then he had an inspiration. He picked up the cat, gently stroking it, and then rose shakily to his feet. Then he placed his revolver between his knees and held the cat carefully cupped in his hands.

Holding his breath, he pitched the cat away from him, relying on its proverbial sense of balance to land on its feet, and at once grabbed the butt of his revolver.

His ruse was immediately successful, for there was a simultaneous spitting and sputtering from the cat, and a muttered curse.

Inspector Higgins fired his revolver at the sound, deeming attack the better part of defence, whilst someone from the other side of the room had a similar notion, and another shot rang out, also aimed at the direction of the noise—at least so the inspector surmised from the flash in the darkness.

"Two of 'em," was his immediate reflection.

Then complete and utter silence.

So there were two others in the room beside himself.

That would be Mapell and Heckenstein—without a doubt. Well, at any rate, when the superintendent did arrive, supposing that he ever did, he would find both the criminals within the house. That, at least, was something. Unless, of course, he and his men arrived too late, and merely found the recently murdered body of a rising detective-inspector of the Metropolitan Police.

Again Inspector Higgins licked his lips. Lord! What a fool he had been butting in on his lonesome like this! He'd properly overreached himself this time. Two desperadoes, adequately armed, and himself with—how many bullets left? Was it two or three? Let's see, now! It took three shots to break down the lock, and one he had fired at the cat. Four! So he had three left—or was it two? Were the official police revolvers six- or seven-chambered? For the life of him Higgins couldn't remember. Better say two and be on the safe side! Two bullets left. One for Mapell and one for Heckenstein. Provided, of course, that he didn't miss! And the worst of it was that he had to fire merely as a last resource, and then simply to disable, whilst neither Mapell nor Heckenstein had such inhibitions. When they fired, they fired to kill.

A comforting thought—I don't think!

And what were the other two up to? Probably creeping towards him in the darkness. This would never do! He must get away from here somehow! Bad tactics on the part of the others to have divided forces. Gave him a bit of an advantage too, for, whilst there were three distinct individuals crawling about in the darkness, both Mapell and Heckenstein upon meeting with anyone else would have instantly to decide whether it was friend or foe, with an even chance of it being either, whereas Higgins suffered under no such disability. Whoever he met would be a foe! Still. . . . Oh law! . . .

To stay in one place was dangerous; to move—infinitely more so!

He had been in a similar position once before, but

the nerve of the other had broken first, and he had given himself away. This time, however, there were two others!

Then the inspector had another inspiration.

Carefully and soundlessly he removed from his pocket his electric torch, placed it upon the floor with the button uppermost, then edged quietly away. Sooner or later one of the others would kneel or tread upon it and so give away his position. With grim humour Higgins reflected that he'd be shot if he couldn't hit just above the resultant beam of light. Then he thought this might be literally as well as figuratively true—and sobered somewhat!

He kept moving. At last he could go no farther—he had reached the wall again. Carefully he felt the obstruction, and discovered with a thrill that it was the door, the lock of which he had shot away. He must have travelled in a circle. Were it not for the protesting squeak of the automatic closer he'd chance making a bolt for it. After all, the superintendent couldn't be so very far away. Yet if the others fired at the sound of the closing door he'd probably get shot in the back. And a live constable is better than a dead inspector! Infinitely so!

Again a period of waiting—seemingly interminable.

Inspector Higgins kept his eyes glued in the direction in which he thought he had left his electric torch, keying his ears to catch the slightest sound. He had covered such a distance, however, that he was not at all sure where exactly he *had* left the torch!

Again he rose to his feet and stood waiting and expectant, ready to fire his revolver on the instant, or to dodge to one side if necessary.

For all his nervous concentration, when at last his trap was sprung, it caught him unprepared, for, when one of the pair inadvertently stepped or knelt or otherwise touched the button of the inspector's electric torch, the resultant ray was directed full in Higgins's direction, and for one brief second he stood blinded by the light, in full view of the others. He flung himself to one side, firing at the

light as he fell. Two sharp flashes, almost simultaneous, followed by a roar of the discharge, and Higgins felt a searing pain in the calf of his leg.

Then again complete quietness, doubly accentuated by the recent reports. Inspector Higgins dared not move. The pain in his leg was bad enough, yet he felt a terrible urge to cough. The fumes of the cordite had penetrated to his lungs, and it was only the thought that the others must be in a similar predicament which prevented him from clearing his throat from the fumes.

At last he could stand it no longer. Seemingly his shots had had no effect unless either Mapell or Heckenstein were wounded and were bearing the wound with the stoical quietude of Higgins himself. Resolutely he stood to his feet. Being near the door he felt for the electric light switch. It was now or never. He had either one or, at the most, two bullets left in his revolver. Duty urged him to attempt to make an arrest. Perhaps he could bluff them. If not, then either Mapell or Heckenstein would be left behind for the superintendent to find when he made his belated arrival.

He pulled down the switch.

Save for a black cat, sedately and placidly licking its paws in the centre of the room, the room was empty.

Then the door burst open, and the superintendent with his men dashed into the room.

"So you've got here at last!" The banal remark removed the tension, and all eyes turned to the direction of a curtain at the other end of the room which was swinging idly, although there was not a breath of wind.

"In there! Steady! They're armed!"

"So I heard"—dryly, from the superintendent.

Behind the curtain was a door, the key of which was facing them. Obviously, in their hurry, Mapell and Heckenstein had had no time to change it, which was just as well.

Higgins tried the door. It was firmly held from the

other side, whilst from the sounds within that other room it was apparent that the others were attempting to erect a barricade.

"Hi! You two inside! You'd better give up! There's enough of us here that if you shoot the lot of us there'll still be half a dozen left!"

One of the superintendent's men guffawed, otherwise there was no sound.

"Come along, Super. We can't afford to let them bolster up the door."

Inspector Higgins set his shoulder at the door, and immediately two of the others followed his example. A steady even pressure and the door slowly gave. When at last the obstruction behind the door toppled over with a crash, both the inspector and his two helpers overbalanced and fell into the room.

Immediately there was the sound of a shot within the room, which momentarily stemmed the rush of the superintendent and the others into the room. Their hesitation was purely involuntary, and a second later the ante-room was flooded with humanity.

The superintendent switched on the light, and immediately all within the room stood still.

Lying face downwards in a pool of blood, a smoking revolver still in his hand, was the figure of a man; whilst in the opposite corner of the room, his right arm shielding his eyes from the light, was another man. Characteristically, Inspector Higgins stepped towards the latter, as being the only one of the pair now capable of giving trouble.

"Stick 'em up, Sonny!"

The man did not move. Inspector Higgins seized his wrist and dragged the man to his feet. Then stopped, appalled. Scored across the man's forehead was a deep vivid furrow, obviously the mark of a bullet, and from the look in the man's eyes, he was, at least temporarily, blind.

Higgins gazed at the man compassionately. Then he recognised him. It was Heckenstein, the notorious American car-thief and gunman.

And the other must be Mapell.

Inspector Higgins stared down at the still form. The man had taken his own life, thus cheating the law of its prey, yet, after all, it possibly simplified matters. The thought obtruded that perhaps the man might still be alive, so, with a faint gesture of repugnance, Inspector Higgins gently turned him over.

An exclamation, forcible and unprintable, broke from his lips.

He was staring into the dead face of Mr. Tyndall, gunsmith and cartridge-maker, of Shoreditch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS MAKES A REPORT

INSPECTOR HIGGINS returned to Scotland Yard the following morning in a thoughtful, almost jubilant frame of mind. The case was practically finished, and although he had undoubtedly been lucky, nevertheless the fruits of success were very pleasant.

For his own satisfaction the inspector had spent a long time in the room in which the battle had been staged, until he had found the bullets he had fired from his revolver. The three bullets he had fired to shatter the lock had travelled no further, but the one he had fired at the noise caused by the falling of the cat he eventually found embedded in the floorboards near the wainscoting. The other bullet was found, surprisingly, in the ceiling, and was mute proof of his frantic effort to dodge the ray of the torch.

He was glad, for, seemingly, it could not have been the one responsible for Heckenstein's injury. Still, he was not satisfied, and it was not until several scratches were discovered on the dead hands of Mapell that he voiced his relief. Naturally a kind-hearted man, he hated to think that any act of his had caused another's blindness, however deserving of such an injury the other might be. The scratches were the deciding factor, for Higgins had fired at the noise and undoubtedly it had been Mapell on whom the cat landed. So Heckenstein's injury was not directly attributable to the inspector.

Higgins personally supervised the search of Handley House. Several interesting finds were made, and eventually it was the inspector's pleasurable duty to return

several very compromising documents to their respective owners. The Police Orphanage Fund received quite a number of large anonymous donations during the month which followed, for Inspector Higgins, when he chose, had a persuasive tongue.

Awaiting the inspector on his return to Scotland Yard was the signed statement of Mr. Tyndall, in which Thomas Hamper was stated to be the purchaser of the gun by which Raymond had been killed.

The previous night Higgins had proved that Mapell's statement over the telephone that he used a special kind of glove in order to leave behind spurious fingerprints had been merely a figment of his imagination, having no foundation in fact, for Mapell's thumbprint was identical with that already so indelibly impressed upon the inspector's memory.

Higgins pressed the button of the electric bell on his desk.

"Take this statement to Sergeant Mercier, and ask him to give it the once-over for fingerprints. Should he find any, ask him to report to me personally."

Sergeant Mercier was not long in making an appearance. Just beneath the signature of Mr. Tyndall was the very faintest impression of the merest edge of the thumb.

"Good enough." Inspector Higgins viewed for the first time with pleasure the portion of that well-known thumbprint. "This lets Tommy out."

. . . . . .

Inspector Higgins knocked respectfully upon the door of the office of Chief Inspector Dryan, whose cheery voice a second later bade him enter. The Chief was seated at his desk, surrounded by papers, but he smiled at Higgins's entrance. He had a genuine affection for his capable subordinate.

"Well, Higgins, me boy. Come to report? Take a seat."

A frail-looking chair was indicated by a wave of his hand, and Higgins frowned askance. He knew that chair!

One of these days it'd let him down, and then . . . Gently he eased himself on to the seat.

"Thank you, sir. The Raymond murder . . . "

With terse phrases Inspector Higgins gave a succinct account of his recent activities, neither amplifying nor minimising any part he himself had played. When he had finished, without interruption (for the Chief rarely had anything to ask until he had heard the whole tale), he slumped back comfortably into his chair, but a protesting squeak brought him quickly upright again.

Chief Inspector Dryan, who had been sitting with his elbows on his desk, his fingers clasped, and solemnly sucking the middle knuckle of his left hand whilst staring at his subordinate's boots, looked up.

"And what of Tyndall's shop in Shoreditch?"

"Very useful, sir. Apparently Mapell had been running the shop for years. All the East End and most of the imported gunmen used to buy their gats from him. Did quite a trade, I fancy. And no questions asked. Also sold burglar's tools and the like. Oh, a very lucrative business!"

"And would Mr. Tyndall, or Mapell, or whatever his name really was, have been allowed to sail for Canada at the end of that week, do you think?"

"I—I hardly know, sir. I was not suspicious, yet . . . He might have done so, sir. We should have wanted him as a witness, which must have delayed the date of his sailing. At any rate"—with a grim smile—"he didn't, which is the main thing."

"And what of Mrs. Hick? 'Found drowned' was the verdict, I think you said?"

"Ah! Mrs. Hick! I missed a chance there, sir. She used to work for Mapell when she lived at Notting Dale. I'm pretty sure she didn't recognise him in his guise of a policeman, yet Mapell himself must have recognised her . . . and possibly took the—er—necessary steps."

"But we'll never know, eh? H'm. And Sanderson's

fully recovered now, eh? I suppose Mapell shot him that time. Another thing we'll never know. There seems to be a devil of a lot we don't know about this case, Higgins," reflected the Chief, plaintively.

Inspector Higgins made no comment.

"What about Sanderson? Can we charge him with anything?"

"Honestly, sir, I don't believe we can—but we can pass the buck."

"H'm?"

"Hand him over to the Yanks. He's wanted there bad enough, I believe."

"Good. And the inquest on Henry Hamper. Shall we need another, do you think?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I don't think so. Sanderson must, for his own protection, stick to his story—although I very much doubt if it's the truth."

"And what do you think is the truth, Higgins?"

"Well, sir," replied the inspector, somewhat doubtfully, "it's pure surmise—I've nothing definite to go on, of course, but—well—I believe that both Mapell and Raymond, who was subsequently shot on top of the bus, were actively concerned with Hamper's death. I should say that the unfortunate man was deliberately gassed whilst unconscious—probably whilst he was asleep—for I don't doubt but that he was inveigled into visiting the big house at Medhurst once again after he had thought he had cut adrift. Or they might have discovered that he was in hiding at Bulstroade's Buildings and forced him to return. As both Raymond and Mapell are dead I don't think any good can entail from holding another inquest—especially as Sanderson must stick to the story he told me."

There was a silence for a moment, whilst Chief Inspector Dryan considered the remarks of his colleague. Eventually:

"I'll have to think it over, Higgins, old chap. Serious

business letting an untrue verdict stand. I expect I'll have to talk it over with the commissioner. There's no evidence other than Sanderson's word, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Save a small piece of rubber tubing which I found in the ashes of the furnace there. It doesn't help much, I'm afraid."

"H'm. I'll think it over." Another silence, then: "And Bobby Bunter. Isn't there anything we can do for that poor stiff?"

Inspector Higgins laughed shortly.

"You can depend, Chief, that if there were—I should have done it. I'm afraid Bobby is incorrigible."

"H'm. A good man gone wrong, that."

"Dunno about 'good man,' Chief," responded Higgins, somewhat uncharitably. "He's gone wrong all right, anyhow."

"What are we holding Heckenstein for? Attempted murder? You, of course, being the—er—attemptee."

"Something of the sort, sir. Unless we hand him over to the American police with Sanderson."

"Might be as well. What of the younger Hamper? Has he been released?"

"Yes, sir. As has Miss Crawford."

"I suppose you handed back to the man Adams his incriminating letters, or whatever it was?"

"Yes, sir. And between you and me, sir, his wife's miles too good for him. I don't wonder at his trepidation that they might be found. What he wants is a damned good hiding."

"Perhaps he'll get it one day. Well, Higgins, I suppose that, as usual, it is my pleasurable duty to congratulate you on the satisfactory outcome of your investigations." Chief Inspector Dryan rose from his seat with his right hand extended, and a smile of real pleasure on his countenance. "The entire gang sewn up, eh?"

"Well, sir. Not—er—not exactly the—er——"

"What's up now? Oh, I see. Soapy. Poor old Soapy.

To think that of that crowd of undesirables Soapy is the only one at large. Why! I remember Soapy in my day! Fancy him giving you the slip!" Dryan laughed indulgently. "Soapy! The most simple of the lot! Gosh! It's funny—damned funny!" The Chief gave himself up to unrestrained amusement.

"Yes, sir. I'll admit it's very humiliating."

Chief Inspector Dryan stopped his cachinnations, and gazed for a long time at his subordinate.

"H'm." A long pause. Then "H'm," again. A still longer period of silence, until at last the Chief emitted a third grunt of incredulity.

Chief Inspector Dryan could see as far through a brick wall as most men in his position.

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR TELLS A STORY

THE bachelor flat of Inspector Higgins was the scene of much jubilation, for the inspector was holding an "At Home."

Young Tommy Hamper, feeling mighty uncomfortable in a collar and tie, was one of the guests, as was Miss Jill Crawford, resplendent in a new party-frock. There were two other guests. One, Mrs. John Snell, merely invited as a sop to the proprieties and as a companion to Jill, was busily engaged with the other—her little son.

The business of tea had been an unqualified success as regards the two ladies and the little boy; Thomas Hamper, however, seemed ill at ease, not entirely accounted for by the restriction of his collar.

Inspector Higgins had regaled his guests with some highly spectacular, if not exactly authentic, stories of his manifold adventures. He was not always the hero, and some of his predicaments, generally with a sub-stratum of truth, caused great amusement.

"And do the police always catch the criminal, Mr. Higgins?" queried Jill Crawford, thrilled to the core.

"Invariably." Not exactly truthful, perhaps, but forgivable under the circumstances.

"Very comforting, I'm sure"—somewhat quizzically, from Mrs. Snell, who, being the daughter of Chief Inspector Dryan, possibly knew when a grain of salt should be taken.

It was inevitable that the case in which both Jill Crawford and young Tommy Hamper had been so intimately connected should come up for discussion.

Inspector Higgins explained to Tommy that the owner

of that empty house in which the lad had spent such an uncomfortable thirty hours had been traced.

"Who was it?"

"Your father, Tommy."

"Dad?"

"Yes, but don't run away with the idea that the property had any value. To begin with it had been condemned by the local authorities as unfit for human habitation. Then, doubtless, there are sundry rates and taxes which remain unpaid. I should say, offhand, that the property was more in the nature of a liability than an asset, and that in any case the money by which it was purchased did not belong to your father, or, if it did, had been—er . . ." Inspector Higgins broke off. He was treading on dangerous ground. What he intended to imply was that the elder Hamper had merely held the premises on behalf of the gang. It was patent, however, that the others realised the purport of his hesitation.

There was a silence, broken at last by Mrs. Snell.

"I'm going out into the garden to have a romp with baby. Coming, Miss Crawford?"

Jill acquiesced with alacrity, and the inspector and young Hamper were left alone.

A curious restraint fell upon the pair. Higgins had been patiently awaiting this opportunity (not entirely unengineered on his part), but now that it had presented itself he was not at all sure where to begin.

As for young Thomas Hamper, he fidgeted in his chair, gazed round the room, at his boots—anywhere save at the grave eyes which were staring with such intentness in his direction. At last Inspector Higgins broke the silence.

"There was another property which we traced to your father, Tommy."

"Yes?"

Higgins nodded. "Yes. A tumbledown old cottage in the country. Know it?"

"N–no."

"It's some distance from Medhurst, but I had a nasty motor accident nearby, and spent a day in the local hospital. By the way, Tommy, I've something of yours I'd like to return."

Inspector Higgins stood up and walked to his desk, returning in a few moments with an envelope, which he gravely handed to the lad. It was that last letter written by Henry Hamper, which Jill Crawford had tried to find, but which had subsequently fallen into the inspector's hands.

Tommy recognised it at once, and with a grateful expression of thanks took the letter, and promptly proceeded to re-read it. Inspector Higgins waited till he had finished, then:

"I should like to tell you a story, Tommy, if you'd care to listen."

Young Hamper vouchsafed no reply, and the inspector gazed at him in silence for a few minutes before he continued.

"Not much of a story, Tommy, perhaps. But one I should very much like you to hear."

Again there was no comment from the other, whether by way of encouragement, or in any attempt to evade the issue.

Inspector Higgins did not speak for a few moments, but surveyed the other in silence. The lad had never, to the inspector's way of thinking, had any real chance in life. There was sterling stuff in him, yet he was the son of his father, and any hereditary taint must be eradicated. True, Henry Hamper, according to that last letter to his son, had endeavoured at the end, to lead a straight life, but—young Hamper had said and done many wild things. He had originally been obsessed with an idea of vengeance, and Higgins wanted to test his character.

"This is my story. Of course, mind you, it's not essentially true, although, on the other hand, it might be."

He paused, as if to pick his words; then he continued: "It's necessary, in the first place, to go back a few weeks, to where a young man made a melodramatic appearance in a mask and rescued a certain—er—eminent police official from a very uncomfortable position."

Young Tommy Hamper squirmed in his chair, but refrained from any remark.

"The young man's arrival was most opportune—if unexpected, for how he got there the—er—eminent police official did not discover until some time afterwards, when a certain letter fell into his hands, in which the young man was warned against visiting such a place."

The inspector stopped and thoughtfully withdrew from his pocket a blackened pipe, a well-filled pouch and a box of matches. With calm deliberation he filled his pipe, struck a match and held the flame to the bowl and sucked meditatively. Blowing a huge cloud of smoke ceilingwards he suddenly bethought himself of the other, and opening a cigarette box offered its contents to him. Tommy took one, sniffed suspiciously at one end, accepted the inspector's offer of a match with ill-grace, then subsided once more into his chair.

"However, the young man was not in charge of the situation for very long, for the tables were turned very shortly afterwards, and the pair found themselves in queer street. Then followed a highly coloured episode in an old-fashioned chimney"—Tommy involuntarily shuddered—"which in turn degenerated into a still more comic episode on a roof top."

A pause during which, under cover of lighting his pipe, Inspector Higgins subjected the youth to a critical inspection. Then:

"A fire followed, and the eminent police official having escaped previously, the melodramatic young man was duly rescued by an efficient fire-brigade, and, to show his appreciation of their services, he promptly vanished without expressing any thanks for his rescue."

"I—I did."

"We're not necessarily talking about you, Tommy. But to continue. The young man vanished. Now where did he go? That was a point which the police had to investigate. Where did this young man go? Now this is the true beginning of my story, Tommy. It may of course not represent the true facts of any particular case, but . . . This young man, having been duly rescued, immediately proceeded to lose himself. He wandered away from his rescuers, and shortly found himself in a long building, entirely uninhabited, and seemingly a comparatively safe haven of refuge. What was this building? A casual inspection, possibly with the aid of matches, revealed the fact that it was a rifle-range. In one corner of the building was a rack. Upon this rack were six rifles. Sports models. Similar weapons to that which caused the death of the man Raymond. Now you and I, Tommy, know that the man Raymond was murdered by Mapell. We naturally wonder why he troubled to buy a further weapon when already he had six identical weapons in his rifle-range at the big house at Medhurst. When we think the matter out, the solution is obvious. By dint of using the rifle-range at Medhurst, Mapell had become proficient in the use of the gun. Mapell had already made up his mind to do away with Raymond, and knew that the man had a commission to collect some money on the fatal night. Naturally he did not wish the other members of the gang to know that he contemplated the destruction of one of their number. Might have caused a little uneasiness which would have taken a great deal of wiping out. So what does he do? Why—he goes to his shop at Shoreditch and gets a similar model and proceeds to carry out his plans. Thus Raymond is removed from the slate. But I digress. I was talking about a certain young man who found himself in a rifle-range with six similar weapons in a rack. What does he do? Why, he borrows one, leaving—a simple arithmetical calculation—five behind. When the police official

subsequently found these five he had a shock. According to his calculations there should only have been four. One taken by its rightful owner Mapell, and one by the aforesaid young man. But only one had gone—you see the difficulty?"

Inspector Higgins paused in his peroration. To a casual observer it would have seemed as if he were needlessly "prolonging the agony," for the solitary auditor of his lengthy speech was mentally suffering. Yet Higgins had an object in view. He had tested the character of Thomas Hamper and found it, in a certain measure, wanting in stability. He intended to teach that young man a lesson which he would never forget, and which would help to keep him to the paths of virtue in the years to come.

"Of course, Mapell should never have purchased his half a dozen sports rifles from that provincial store when he could have just as easily supplied himself from the shop at Shoreditch. Personally I think that the shop was one of his sidelines, known only to himself, and he was afraid that the others might get to know of it were he to make frequent purchases there. After all, ostensibly these rifles were wanted for a legitimate purpose, and the shop at Shoreditch was a long way off. I have ascertained that Sanderson himself purchased the rifles, which may of course have accounted for the fact of their being purchased other than from Shoreditch. Be that as it may—what did this young man do when he found himself in possession of one of the rifles and some ammunition which fitted?"

A pause for dramatic effect.

"Why—he suddenly bethinks himself of an empty cottage which——"

"I—I——" An inarticulate interruption from the harassed youth.

"It's all right, Tommy. I am fully aware that a moment ago you informed me that you had no knowledge of a tumbledown old cottage in the country. So you see this fictitious young man couldn't possibly be you"—blandly,

with a quizzical glance in his direction. The other subsided into silence, uncomfortable and strained.

"It was a long walk—and a dirty night, I remember. It snowed." Higgins paused, reflectively. "This young man eventually arrived near the cottage in the early hours of the following morning. He had a loaded gun in his hands, not an unusual sight in that sporting neighbourhood, and—murder in his heart, Tommy"—impressively. "There was a mysterious activity in and about the cottage. People coming and going—and what not. Suddenly the door opens. A large man is led out, manacled to two others. A tempting target, Tommy. Especially when one considers the way the large man was responsible for the leading astray of a certain other man who died of gas-poisoning."

Thomas Hamper stood up from his chair, gazed wildly round the room, then with a heartrending sob buried his face in his hands, and burst into tears. Tommy had had his lesson.

Inspector Higgins rose to his feet and laid a kindly hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Never mind, Tommy lad. Confession is good for the soul, and I imagine that this tale has already been told to a certain solicitor who had such unkind things to say about the police. In any case, the large man—er—went abroad without preferring a charge against his assailant."

Tommy raised a haggard face.

"God, sir. You're a white man. If all the police were like you . . ."

"They are, Tommy. Ninety-nine point nine per cent. of 'em. You mustn't take any notice of the others—they're an infinitesimal minority. There's black sheep in every family, and . . ."

CHAPTER XL

IN WHICH SOME ADVICE IS TENDERED

JILL CRAWFORD ran in from the garden, a radiant vision and the tension was broken.

"Hullo, you two. Come and look at the baby. Isn't he a dear! I'd like one like him." She turned to the inspector. "Tommy and I are to be married shortly, you know."

Higgins turned to Tommy, who was strenuously endeavouring to hide the signs of his recent distress. He raised his eyebrows in mute, quizzical enquiry.

"That's right, sir. We are."

"Oh, you are, eh? H'm. Bit on the young side aren't you both? One of our leading humorous periodicals once gave some very sound advice to those about to marry, which has since become famous, and seems to be most applicable to a couple of your tender years."

"Yes?"—eagerly, from Jill, whose innocent impetuosity laid her open to such attacks.

"The advice was: Don't!"

"Oh!" Miss Crawford tossed her pretty head in indignation.

"Yes. It was a somewhat cynical attempt at humour rather than an exhortation to immorality. In your case, however, I would, in all humility, attach an addendum to the cryptic advice offered, and say: Don't—yet!"

"Ah!"

"You're both such kids, you see. Tommy, you owe it to Jill to wait until you can afford to keep her in comfort, if not in luxury. Poverty makes or mars marital happiness, with the odds in favour of the latter. Tommy, my lad, on one memorable occasion you told me you used to play

cover-point at school, and gave me proof of your deadly aim with a piece of coal. I dare say I could get you a job on the ground staff of some County Cricket Club, that is, of course, should you show any further aptitude for the game."

"Thank you very much, sir, but . . ."

"You must postpone for a few years your wedding-day."

The two young people looked at each other doubtfully, but before they could make up their minds Mrs. John Snell looked in from the garden doorway, her baby (far from mute evidence of *her* marital happiness) in her arms, and frowned at the inspector.

"Uncle Higgins," she remarked, severely, "you're talking the most utter and complete blather."

"Marjorie, me dear, thank you very much for those kind words—and—er—other things," he added, inconsequently.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile, leaning over the taffrail of an ocean-going tramp steamer, was a man. Small, wizened and middle-aged. He stared reflectively at the bubbling foam which marked the wake of the steamer—narrow at the ship's stern, but ever widening until it was lost to sight on the horizon. His snow-white hair was gently ruffled by the wind.

A cry from the look-out of "Land ahead" caused him to turn and stroll forward. There, a mere pencil of dark at the very edge of the horizon, was the land of his adoption. He sighed. He had no regrets at leaving the land of his birth, yet . . . He squared his shoulders, then a tender smile played about his grim features. It was Soapy Sudd. He had twenty pounds in his pocket, and a prayer in his heart for a certain inspector of police. For once, in his own clumsy fashion, he had tried to warn that inspector of impending peril—and Inspector Higgins "owes not any man."

EPILOGUE

A MAN and a woman were seated in the drawing-room of a private suite (generally reserved for the ultra-wealthy) of a luxurious and exclusive Continental hotel. The man was sipping a whisky and soda—the woman reading a novel.

"Well, Sis, we got away with it!" The voice was that of Thomas Hamper.

The woman looked up with a sophisticated smile.

"Yes," she acquiesced. "But we had some very narrow squeaks."

Thomas Hamper nodded his agreement. "Yes, we certainly did—but fortunately we're quick thinkers." A pause of reminiscent thought, then: "Look at that time when Higgins caught us in that empty house. We had to act quickly then. You walked heavily across the floor in order to warn Higgins of our presence, and thus stifle any suspicion he might have entertained that we were trying to dodge him. He's an easy one, that chap. You kidded him that you were my girl instead of my sister—and he fell for it. What made you think of the name of 'Jill'?"

"Dunno. Sounds the picture of innocence, anyhow."

Hamper laughed. "Innocence! Good Lord! The way you took the key from under his nose and left it in the area was cute—bit too cute, almost."

"Yes. As a matter of fact I nearly gave the game away at the very outset. I told Higgins that I *knew* you were in that attic. Then I amended it by saying I meant I could feel it. Fortunately his chivalrous"—they both laughed at the word—"chivalrous effort in leaving us together before he questioned you enabled us to perfect our plans."

"Then my attack on Higgins and my attempted escape was a good bluff—although I didn't bargain on getting my arm damaged. When he mentioned hospitals I got a shock. I had a lot to do that night."

"You might have told me. I was in an awful state when I couldn't find you. I'd been followed about all day by an inquisitive cop."

"Well. I was going to settle with the others of the gang. You know when we had the bust-up because they thought that the dad and I were getting too much control of the funds they did in the old man between them. It would have been our turn next. Anyhow, I went to the Medhurst House and was surprised to find our friend Higgins already there. He asked for my revolver. I told him it wasn't loaded and he believed me. Sanderson didn't, though. He was in a fearful sweat. Thought his hour had come. He was in between two fires: Mapell and me, even if we don't count the dear inspector. When the others learned I was in the house they were well after my blood. Tried to kill both me and Higgins. Old Higgins couldn't make head nor tail of it, I could see. He was running over in his mind the apparently senseless attack on his person—little dreaming that I was the larger fry. I tried to help the other members of the gang as regards getting rid of the inspector. I could well afford to, for the blame would be laid at their door—not mine. But Higgins bears a charmed life. For instance, when he hauled in the ladder from the window, I left him holding the sack, but they missed him. Then I tried to assist him *down* the chimney. Failed again. Then I tried to drop him off the roof, but he caught hold of the guttering. Born lucky. Anyhow he must have gone over the Medhurst house pretty thoroughly afterwards. Found some of my fingerprints there too, I'll bet. Lucky he saw me there. I hope that none turned up in unlikely places. They couldn't very well, or a man, even of Higgins's mental calibre, must have been put upon enquiry."

"And what of Mrs. Hick?"

"Mapell"—laconically, from the man. "She knew nothing of us."

"The car was in your name, wasn't it, Tommy?"

"Yes." Hamper frowned. "Mapell talked me into that. I must avoid such a mistake in future, although I remember that it pleased my vanity at the time."

There was a short silence, broken at last by the woman known to Inspector Higgins as Jill Crawford.

"You know, Tommy, I nearly gave you away when they questioned me at Scotland Yard. I was acting a part and fluffed my lines. An almost authentic faint, however, saved the situation. The matron at Scotland Yard is rather a motherly old soul"—cynically.

"Never mind, Sis. I have you to thank for getting me out of one mess. Higgins must have wondered how I knew of the house at Medhurst. You gave me the idea of sending that letter to myself as though my father had sent it. I'll admit that the idea of sending it to an old address was my own, but . . . Anyhow, it was you, Sis, who planted it on the trusting Higgins."

"Which reminds me, Tommy. You've squared the landlady all right?"

"Yes." A pause. "She'd better not squeal"—cold and menacing.

"Did you ever find out why Mapell followed us into that house at Horton?"

"Can't say. Probably accidental, yet Mapell's a good guesser or—I should say—*was* a good guesser. He'd know that Raymond had met his fate from that house, and he was probably looking round for some means to give me away. He got rid of Sanderson very neatly. I made a bad break there."

"What made you shoot Sanderson?"

"I was somewhat hasty, Sis. After the fire I obtained a gun and some ammunition from the range and cleared off to that old cottage in order to hole up for a while.

Just as I got there who should come out but Sanderson and two or three slops. Naturally I jumped to the conclusion that Sanderson had split to the police and they had been there to look for me. I didn't realise that he was in custody. It was a question of self-defence. A good opportunity to finish the job I had in mind when I returned to Medhurst and found the inspector already there. I must admit, however, that it was an appallingly bad shot. Nothing like the one by which I ended Raymond's existence. Still, I'm always better with a moving target. Inspector Higgins was very near the mark with his fairy story, as he called it. I had a most uncomfortable quarter of an hour, and it was only the thought that you were with that woman outside that gave me encouragement. I had only to call for aid."

Another pause whilst Hamper refilled his glass, and his sister lit another cigarette. Then:

"It was damned funny Higgins sending me to that solicitor. On the way back I telephoned to him in Mapell's voice offering to buy him off. As though the innocent Higgins would 'sell his soul.' " Hamper sniggered. "I wanted to impress that voice upon him. I told him about the gloves with Mapell's fingerprints on 'em. I knew he wouldn't believe me."

"You told him?" The woman sat up in alarm.

"What did it matter? When our father had those gloves made he knew what he was doing. He always wore them when on a job. Naturally Mapell didn't know, or he might have kicked."

"Still, they nearly gave us away, Tommy."

"Yes. I had a shaky five minutes explaining to the Customs people that I worked in chemicals and used 'em to protect my hands."

"You should have destroyed them, Tommy. What on earth made you bring 'em out here?"

"They're worth quids to us, Sis. I can sell 'em to one of the flash crooks this side."

"I was very frightened when Higgins held us both at Scotland Yard on those absurd charges."

"He wished to protect us from Mapell." Hamper laughed. "I must hand it to Mapell in having the nerve to come to the Yard as Tyndall and pick me out at an identification parade."

"Why didn't you split on him then?"

"Dangerous for me, my dear. To split on him was tantamount to a confession by myself. I could always get Mapell. I'd made all arrangements. I'd already left with your efficient landlady a wonderful letter to a Mr. Henry Adams, with full instructions as to such advertisements in *The Times* Agony column as might be necessary. Inspector Higgins should have known that no self-respecting crook (if you'll excuse the expression, my dear) would make such a mistake as sending the letter to Mr. Adams, and then following it up with an advertisement giving away his address. You see, Handley House belonged to the gang, and I knew that Mapell and Heckenstein would hole up there for a while. That letter to Adams was an ingenious method of giving him away. And it succeeded—whilst I was in durance vile."

"And that wonderful homily on marriage—to a brother and his sister. Tommy, that was almost too funny!"

"Yes, Sis. When did we tell him we were going to be married? The thirtieth of June wasn't it? Lord, what a simp the man is!"

A burst of genuine merriment from the pair, until the woman sobered.

"Still, Tommy, we must forget all about this. It's dangerous to think—let alone talk—of our little efforts."

"Danger? What is danger?"—oracularly. "You can't make a success in our profession unless you've no nerves —no conscience, and can play a part above the average. That's one of the old man's maxims."

"You're a marvel, Tommy."

Hamper smiled a crooked smile of self-conceit.

"Lord, Sis! If that old woman Higgins could only see us now, he——"

"He can."

The pair swung round as the voice interrupted. Framed in the doorway was the massive figure of the inspector, a revolver in his right hand, and two pairs of handcuffs suspended gently from the index finger of his left hand. Behind the inspector were sundry figures in ornate uniforms.

Higgins beckoned with the index finger of his left hand. The handcuffs jingled musically.

Hamper should have destroyed those tell-tale gloves, for the matter had been duly reported by the Customs Authorities, and Inspector Higgins had rather more intelligence than that with which Hamper credited him.

. . . . . .

It was a coincidence that the day Hamper had stated he would marry "Jill Crawford" should prove to be the day he had the doubtful privilege of ordering what he liked for breakfast.

THE END